THE LAST PEACE

THE YEARS BEFORE THE WAR

2028–2034

FRANCESCO PRATO

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Author's Note

This book is a work of speculative fiction. The hypothetical war, the political, diplomatic, and military developments, the governments, the parties, the movements, the alliances, the crises, the statements, and the decisions described in the novel are the product of the author's imagination.

The work draws freely on historical events, geopolitical dynamics, and public debates, using them as narrative material to construct an imaginary future scenario. These references are not documentary reconstructions, predictions, or attributions of intentions to real people, governments, parties, or institutions.

The political figures, leaders, governments, parties, and movements that appear in the story are fictional. Some may have names, positions, or traits that recall real-life individuals. These are narrative choices made to enhance the plausibility of the scenario, and no statement, decision, or responsibility attributed in the novel to a fictional character should be considered to refer, directly or indirectly, to real people or organizations.

All dialogue, intentions, and actions described are invented. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events, present or future, is purely coincidental, or the result of the narrative use of plausible scenarios. The work makes no accusations or predictions about the behavior of any real person or organization, nor does it suggest that anyone has approved or inspired its content.

Historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis.
History is the witness of times, the light of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life, the messenger of antiquity.

— Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Oratore*, II, 9, 36

What experience and history teach is this—that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.

— Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Introduction

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CHAPTER I

When It Was Not Yet History

The hardest part, afterward, was understanding when everything had really begun to change.

There had been no single day, no single decision that could explain what came next. There had been crises overcome, elections that had shifted the balance, alliances grown more fragile, decisions postponed, and compromises that had bought time without resolving the issues that had made them necessary.

Taken on its own, each step always seemed manageable.

That was also why, when the war came in 2035, it did not seem like the beginning of something new. It seemed like the conclusion of everything that had been contained, postponed, or left unresolved in the years before.

Almost to the end, many went on believing there would still be time. Afterward, almost everyone said they had seen the signs.

Years later, when I had to explain to my students how the war began, the hardest question came right away.

"Why didn't anyone stop it sooner?"

I had spent years looking for that answer in meeting minutes, speeches, voting records, memoirs, and documents that had become accessible over the years. I knew the dates, the names, and in

some cases even the exact times. I knew when one government had hesitated, when another had backed down, when a decision made to reduce one risk had created a greater one. And I knew the name of the man I would end up mentioning more often than any other when I spoke about those years.

That was the problem: I already knew how it ended. It is the first mistake we make when we try to understand a catastrophe: we look back and see a clear road. The decisions seem to line up one behind the other, each pointing toward the next, as if those who made them could see where they led. But a road only exists for those who have already arrived.

For those walking it, though, there are many crossroads.

In 2028, no one woke up thinking that Europe would be in a major war seven years later. People went to work, took their children to school, and booked vacations for the following summer. Soccer clubs changed coaches, governments argued about taxes, energy, and immigration. Stories that now fill entire chapters in textbooks lasted a few days in the newspapers of the time, and then disappeared.

The decisions that changed everything began the same way. One seemed to concern only the United States, another the United Kingdom, a third France. Then came Germany, the Baltic, and the Mediterranean. Perhaps that was the real beginning. Not when someone chose war, but when more and more people came to believe that, if it came, it would hit someone else first.

I wrote a year on the blackboard: 2028.

"Did it start in 2028? Right here?" one student asked.

I looked at the year. In 2028 there were already wars, rivalries, fears, and worn-out alliances. Many of the forces that would drive the coming years had existed for a long time. Choosing a date inevitably meant leaving something out.

But to tell that part of history, you had to start somewhere.

The bell rang in the hallway; I looked again at the 2028 on the blackboard. “Yes. Let’s start here.”

CHAPTER II

America Comes Home

In the next class, I asked the students when the United States had truly abandoned Europe. Almost everyone pointed to the same date: December 18, 2031, the day Washington formally ceased to be a member of NATO, once the year stipulated by the North Atlantic Treaty had elapsed. It is the answer I expected, and it is understandable: history books need dates, and dates have the deceptive virtue of turning long, hesitant processes into events with a clear beginning and end, like cutting a ribbon.

That answer may be correct in law. In history, it is wrong.

"Why wrong?" one student asked. "That's the date. That's what the treaty says."

"Exact dates are sometimes the most misleading. We tell ourselves something's begun when it's really only ended."

The United States did not leave Europe in a single day. It began to leave much earlier, silently, when a growing number of Americans stopped considering European security a national necessity and came to see it as a debt inherited from another era: expensive, difficult to justify, and, above all, no longer inevitable.

If I had to pinpoint the real beginning, I would go back to the early months of 2028. The sitting president was still in the White

House. Inside the Republican Party, a fight was already taking shape over who would inherit his political legacy and where the party would go after him.

For much of 2027, Washington lived in a state of ambiguity that the incumbent president seemed to cultivate with an almost theatrical flair. The Twenty-Second Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits anyone from being elected president more than twice. After two terms, most constitutional scholars saw little room to argue about what that meant.

That did not stop the president from leaving the question open. The first caps appeared with 2028 embroidered above the brim. Lawmakers and commentators close to the White House started floating amendments, creative interpretations, and legal loopholes. And when reporters asked him about it in the Oval Office, the president answered with half-jokes, half-hints, and a smile that never quite closed the door.

It was also a way to remain in control of his own succession.

The matter was settled only in late 2027, in front of a group of reporters in the Oval Office. The president joked once more that "part of the country" would have kept him in the White House forever. Then, as casually as if he were commenting on the stock market, he conceded that the law stood in the way, and that he had no intention of turning it into a constitutional fight that could eat up the last months of his presidency.

There was nothing solemn about it. He gave it up almost in passing, between an answer on the economy and a joke for the photographers. That was why, to those who knew him, it rang truer than any prepared speech.

His third term died there, almost as an afterthought.

From that moment the succession became an open race, and two names quickly came to dominate it: Marco Rivas and James

Varden. They belonged to the same party and shared many of the slogans that had transformed the Republican Party in recent years, but they stood for two very different ideas of American power.

Marco Rivas, just over fifty, had spent years building a solid Republican record, with experience in government and a particular interest in foreign policy. He was hard on immigration, hard on China, hard on trade, but he retained a more traditional view of America's role in the world: the United States was stronger when it could count on allies, bases, treaties, and governments willing to move in the same direction. He asked Europeans to spend much more on their own defense, but he continued to regard the Atlantic Alliance as an instrument of American power, not a favor granted to the Old Continent.

James Varden came from a younger wing of the party, one with far less patience for American interventionism. He had built his reputation by speaking mainly to the industrial and post-industrial areas of the Midwest, where the decline of manufacturing, distrust of Washington, and the cost of distant wars had merged into a single political argument. He had experience in federal institutions, but he still came across as a man who had reached the top late and cared little for the rituals of the establishment.

He was not proposing an America closed off from the world. His argument was that a great power had to draw a harder line between what truly concerned its own security and what, over time, had become an obligation kept up almost out of habit.

The difference came down to this: Rivas asked how to make Europeans better allies; Varden was starting to ask whether, after eighty years, it was still America's job to force them to.

American primaries are not decided in a single day. State by state, candidates accumulate delegates who will vote at the national convention, and the early wins often count almost as much as the

numbers themselves, because they turn a possible candidate into an inevitable one.

Rivas started stronger. A well-oiled campaign machine, solid donors, and governors ready to take sides. Varden struggled at first. But in the industrial districts of Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, something was stirring beneath the surface—something the polls would pick up only later. For many voters, Varden was not just another candidate: he was the man who spoke their language. In that language, every alliance, every expenditure, every promise abroad had to answer one question, simple to the point of brutality: what does this actually do for us Americans?

The gap between the two came into the open during the first major televised debate, when, for the first time, the word "Europe" landed on the stage with the weight of a boulder.

Rivas acknowledged that too many European countries were spending less than they should on their own defense, and he promised, as president, to set much stricter targets. But, he added, an alliance is not charity: a great power keeps bases and treaties not out of generosity, but to multiply its own strength.

Varden let him finish without interrupting once. Then he tilted his head slightly and spoke in the almost casual tone he used when he wanted an opponent's argument to sound like a relic: "If we have to pay for someone to multiply our strength, maybe they're not multiplying it enough."

Seven seconds of airtime. That was enough: the clip was cut, shared, and replayed millions of times before the next day had even begun.

What followed was anything but straightforward. Rivas continued to win, but Varden gained ground. The delegates were divided, and no one managed to land the decisive blow. Hovering over both of them was the long shadow of the incumbent

president, who was not running but remained the man half the Republican Party was still waiting to hear from.

The word came in April 2028, in a sports arena in Grand Rapids, under white lights that made everything feel a little tenser than usual. For almost an hour, the president did not even mention the succession. He talked about the economy, the southern border, China. At campaign headquarters, Rivas's staff sat glued to their phones and began to half believe that the president would stay neutral long enough to lock in their candidate's lead.

Then the tone changed.

The president said that Rivas was a capable Republican who had served the party and the country well and would continue to do so. He said nothing more. He paused for a few seconds, no longer than a breath. It was enough. The crowd understood before the reporters did.

Varden stepped onto the stage, and the president placed a hand on his shoulder.

"This is my man, the one I want in the White House," he said.

Formally, nothing had changed. Politically, everything had. Within forty-eight hours, the first defections came. Governors and senators who had kept their distance until then sided with Varden, while some of Rivas's biggest donors suspended their contributions.

Rivas held out for weeks, winning where he could still win, but once the delegate gap became a chasm, he suspended his campaign. At the convention that summer, James Varden officially became the Republican nominee.

The war was seven years away. No one in that hall was counting.

The Democrats had watched that battle with an optimism that, in hindsight, would seem almost naive. Their candidate was

Thomas Callahan: a sitting governor, sixty-nine, Catholic, raised in a middle-class family in Pittsburgh. He had been chosen because he seemed the right man to win back the blue-collar voters the party had lost over the previous decade. He talked about wages, hospitals, factories, and schools, carefully avoiding the ideological battles that the Republicans could have used against him.

His problem was that, while he reassured the center, he left the party's left wing cold.

To mend the rift, he chose Elena Morales as his running mate. She was a forty-one-year-old congresswoman from New York, a voice of the party's most radical wing and an advocate of greater federal intervention in the economy and of lower military spending. Morales brought with her what Callahan lacked: enthusiasm, young people, activists.

Varden saw at once how to turn her into a weapon. He all but stopped attacking Callahan and talked about her instead. Republican ads showed the governor's calm face, then Morales's, while a voiceover asked: "And if he can't serve?"

In the U.S. system, the vice president is not a supporting player: if the president dies, resigns, or is no longer able to perform his duties, the vice president immediately takes his place. Varden did not have to convince voters that Callahan was a radical. He only had to sow the doubt that voting for Callahan also meant accepting the possibility that Elena Morales might one day sit in the Oval Office.

Callahan tried to steer the campaign back to wages and the real economy. The question came back anyway, every time, as quiet as it was deadly.

It was during the second presidential debate that NATO truly entered the race. A reporter asked Varden whether he would consider Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty binding. Article 5 was the heart of the Atlantic Alliance: it stipulated that an armed attack

against one member would be considered an attack against all. It did not require each country to declare war at the same moment, but for nearly eighty years its real value had been psychological: anyone thinking of attacking Estonia, Poland, or Lithuania had to reckon with the United States first.

Varden replied that he would abide by the Constitution. The reporter pressed on: "If Estonia were attacked, would you send American soldiers to defend it?"

For a few endless seconds, the only sound in the studio was the hum of the lights. Varden let that silence speak for him. Then he added, "No American president should pledge the lives of American sons and daughters before even knowing what kind of war it is, who provoked it, and what American interests are truly at stake."

Callahan jumped in, accusing him of wanting to destroy the Atlantic Alliance. Varden turned to him, unhurriedly, and said, "An alliance is destroyed when one country pays and everyone else makes promises."

The November 2028 election was much closer than Varden would later admit. Callahan gained in the suburbs. Morales turned out young voters in the big cities but lost ground among independents. For hours, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin hung in the balance, turning election night into a vigil of projections, partial counts, and live reports from the battleground states.

An American president is not chosen by the popular vote but by electoral votes awarded state by state. That is why a few tens of thousands of ballots in Pennsylvania or Wisconsin can outweigh millions cast elsewhere.

At 2:41 a.m., one of the major television networks called Pennsylvania for Varden, and Callahan's path to the White House narrowed almost to nothing. This did not mean that every ballot had

been counted. It meant that, given what was left to count, no comeback looked realistic anymore.

Callahan called to concede shortly afterward.

In his victory speech, Varden devoted less than a minute to NATO: "Our European friends will continue to be our friends," he said. "But the time when Americans paid so that others did not have to defend themselves is over."

In Washington, the crowd erupted in applause that shook the barriers. In Brussels it was already morning. In offices that had stayed open all night to follow the results, Europe came up with the first of many formulas it would use to put off the reckoning: campaigning is one thing, governing is another.

For the first hundred days, that hope even seemed to hold. Varden did not tear up the North Atlantic Treaty, did not order sudden withdrawals, and did not turn campaign rhetoric into an immediate break. For now, he only asked the Europeans to prove that the Atlantic Alliance still deserved to exist.

The Pentagon opened a new review of the American presence on the continent. The White House demanded new spending targets and stopped settling for a bare percentage of GDP. Varden wanted ammunition actually in stock, air-defense systems, artillery, logistics, and depots that could sustain European armies for months, not days.

Many of his criticisms were well-founded: he could point to budgets, industrial shortfalls, dwindling stockpiles, and decades of European promises never fully kept. And he could ask a question that was almost impossible to dismiss in America: why should a worker in Ohio keep paying for the security of countries rich enough to fund welfare systems more generous than his own—countries that, for decades, had spent less on their own defense?

In Youngstown, Ohio, a plant that manufactured components for the automotive industry had closed the previous year, laying off just over four hundred people. A local newspaper interviewed one of the laid-off workers at a Varden rally in the county. The quote, picked up by several national networks in the following days, became one of Varden's most frequently used talking points: "Nobody's ever explained to me why we should pay to defend a continent the Germans, with their economy, could defend perfectly well on their own."

Across Europe, almost everyone interpreted Varden's demands as the opening of negotiations on the price of the alliance. Few considered the simplest and most frightening possibility: that the president was not raising the price.

He was getting up from the table.

When Varden arrived in Brussels for a NATO summit in October 2029, weeks of diplomatic work had already produced a draft that committed the Europeans to new levels of spending and acknowledged, in black and white, the value of the transatlantic bond.

But that was not how it went.

Varden shook hands, smiled for the cameras, traded jokes with a couple of heads of government; until he took the floor, he gave nothing away.

Then, in front of the microphones, he said, "When this alliance was formed, Europe was a shattered continent, unable to ensure its own security, threatened by a power that dominated half of it. That Europe no longer exists."

He stopped. He waited for the interpreters to finish.

"For decades, the United States has guaranteed European security, bearing the cost, assuming the risks, and providing personnel, equipment, and resources. But what begins as protection in

extraordinary situations cannot, generation after generation, turn into permanent dependence."

In the room, some delegates stopped writing.

"Today's Europe is wealthy, developed, and perfectly capable of taking responsibility for its own defense. The time has come for it to do so."

Another short pause.

"For this reason, I will ask the Congress of the United States to authorize our great nation's withdrawal from the North Atlantic Treaty."

For a few seconds, no one reacted, no one moved, as if the sentence needed time to travel through the air before it was truly heard.

Only later would it be possible to grasp the weight of that silence. That evening, no one was talking about a point of no return yet. But from that moment on, almost without anyone noticing, some doors began to close.

In Washington, one obstacle remained, and many Europeans saw it at once as decisive. In 2023, Congress had passed a law preventing the president from unilaterally withdrawing the United States from NATO without the consent of two-thirds of the senators present, or without a law passed by Congress itself.

Varden had the numbers to govern, but not the numbers to clear that hurdle.

The measure passed in the House. In the Senate, a group of Republicans sided with the Democrats. The most prominent was William Hargrove, a seventy-two-year-old senator from Nebraska, a rock-ribbed conservative old enough to remember a party in which NATO had never been a point of contention.

On the eve of the vote, he argued that the Atlantic Alliance was not a gift to Europeans, but one of the tools with which America

had, for decades, prevented European conflicts from becoming American wars. “If we let those who might attack Europe stop wondering whether we would come,” he said at the time, “we will not have averted a war. We will have made it more likely. I am not asking America to die for Tallinn. I am asking that we make sure no one dares attack it, precisely because they believe the United States will intervene.”

In the corridors of the Capitol on the morning of the vote, some Republican senators continued to avoid reporters, determined not to make their decision public until the last moment. In the Senate gallery sat several European ambassadors accredited to Washington, phones off as the rules required, eyes fixed on the chamber.

Hargrove walked in knowing that, whatever happened that day, it would not end there.

The clerk called the roll, name by name. When the count stopped on December 12, the number was sixty-one. Six short.

In Europe, the headlines were immediate and relieved: “The Senate stops Varden. NATO is safe.” Markets rallied.

It lasted six days.

Then the Attorney General announced that the White House considered the 2023 law itself unconstitutional.

The dispute looked like a technicality, but it touched a real gap: the U.S. Constitution spells out how a treaty comes into being, negotiated by the president and approved by two-thirds of the Senate, but it says far less clearly who can end one. The White House argued that the president had the power to withdraw from a treaty that no longer served the national interest. Opposing senators countered that one will alone could not undo what had required the consent of two.

Hargrove boiled it all down to an image that anyone could understand: "We installed two locks to close that door. The president claims that his key alone is enough to reopen it."

This was not the first time America had faced the question. In 1978, notice of withdrawal from the mutual defense treaty with Taiwan had taken the same issue to the Supreme Court. But *Goldwater v. Carter* settled nothing: the justices sidestepped a general rule, and the question was left essentially open.

Varden suddenly made it real. The lawsuit, brought by Hargrove and a bipartisan group of senators, accused the president not only of seeking to withdraw from the Treaty but also of violating a law passed specifically to prevent him from doing so. Following conflicting decisions in the lower courts, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case in March 2030.

From that point on, *Hargrove v. Varden* was no longer just about NATO. It was about the line between the powers of Congress and those of the presidency.

On the morning of the hearing, supporters and opponents had gathered outside the Court. On one side were placards against the "forever wars"; on the other, Polish, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian flags.

Inside, Europe barely came up. The arguments were about Article II, the separation of powers, constitutional precedent. One Justice asked what would happen if the president considered that any other treaty endangered national security; another asked why the Senate, indispensable at a treaty's birth, should become irrelevant at its death. The answers were technical, cautious, and built to concede nothing.

The ruling came on December 15, 2030: five votes to four.

The Court did not say that leaving NATO was the right thing to do, nor did it grant the president unlimited power over foreign

policy. But it ruled that Congress could not compel the executive branch to formally keep alive a treaty that the president had decided to abandon in the exercise of his diplomatic prerogatives. The part of the 2023 law that made withdrawal contingent on a two-thirds vote in the Senate was declared unconstitutional.

Hargrove left the building with the ruling under his arm and his collar turned up. To the reporters who crowded around him, he said only, "Today, we discovered that the door had only one lock."

Three hours later, Varden announced that the United States would formally notify its allies of its decision. On December 18, 2030, Washington did so.

The Treaty did not allow an immediate exit: Article 13 required a full year between notification and the actual end of membership. Europe faced something no previous generation had ever known: an exact date for the end of the American guarantee.

December 18, 2031, was three hundred sixty-five days away. It seemed like a lot of time.

It was not.

Television stations began running countdown clocks of the days left. European defense ministries drew up future scenarios. Some governments revived the idea of an independent European defense, others called for more capabilities to be immediately deployed to the eastern flank, and still others sought a formula for maintaining a functioning NATO even without the United States.

Every government knew that it had to prepare. Almost all of them still hoped that something—an event, a political shift, a new administration in Washington—would change course before the deadline.

That year would later be dubbed "the wasted year."

"Wasted by whom?" a student asked.

"No one in particular. Which is exactly why nobody felt they had to stop it."

But that kind of judgment carries the arrogance of those who already know how the story ends.

At the time, no alternative seemed easy. A European army would have required a single command, and a single command would have meant giving up a degree of sovereignty that many governments were not prepared to accept. An all-European nuclear deterrent would have forced France and, to a different extent, the United Kingdom to state clearly whether they were willing to risk Paris or London for Tallinn. A rapid German rearmament would have reopened historical wounds that European integration had spent decades keeping out of sight.

Behind every military problem lay a political one, and behind almost every political problem loomed an election: one country was about to vote, another was grappling with internal difficulties. Taken on its own, every delay could be defended before any parliament. Then came the next one. And the one after that.

And beneath all of it was a date: November 2032, when Americans would either reelect Varden or choose someone new. A new Democratic president could have mended the transatlantic relationship, brought America back into NATO, or built an equivalent guarantee. As long as that possibility remained open, many governments thought it premature to take on right away the enormous cost of a European army, industrial conversion, higher taxes, welfare cuts, and further surrenders of sovereignty.

It was prudence, repeated often enough to produce exactly the same result as inertia.

When December 18, 2031, finally came, the formal end of America's membership in NATO seemed surprisingly ordinary.

There were no sirens, no hasty withdrawals. That very normality made it harder to grasp how deeply things had already changed.

Varden spoke from the White House and assured Europeans that America was not abandoning them. The two sides would remain friends, keep trading, keep cooperating, and intervene whenever fundamental American interests demanded it. Then he added: "The United States will no longer automatically guarantee the security of every European border."

The decisive word was automatically.

For the first time in generations, those looking at Europe from the East could try to tell a European war apart from an American one. That alone was a great deal.

By early 2032, the American withdrawal became visible. Varden did not want it to look like a hurried retreat: a disorderly departure would have signaled weakness at the very moment the White House meant to present it as a rational redistribution of American power. So the Pentagon drew up a schedule, briefly kept some bases through bilateral agreements, and gradually moved units, vehicles, and families back to the United States or out to the Pacific.

In Germany, where in some areas the American presence had, generation after generation, become part of the social as well as the military landscape, the departures produced almost domestic scenes. Boxes loaded into vans. Children saying goodbye to classmates they would never see again. Trucks pulling out of bases around which whole neighborhoods had grown up, with their shops, their restaurants, entire small economies.

Outside one of those gates, an elderly German man appeared in the TV footage holding a handwritten sign: THANK YOU.

He was not asking the Americans to stay; he was thanking them for having been there.

A small group of former civilian employees of the base had gathered beside him, without having arranged to meet. Some still wore around their necks ID badges that no longer opened anything. A photographer from a local newspaper took that picture almost by chance, among the many he took that day. It was only in the following days, when international news agencies picked it up, that it became the silent symbol of an entire withdrawal.

In Poland, the reaction was different: Warsaw had invested heavily in its relationship with Washington and considered the physical presence of American soldiers the best possible guarantee against future aggression. When those units began to leave, the Polish government did not organize protests; it increased military spending. If no one could guarantee Poland's security anymore, Poland would guarantee its own.

By mid-2032, Europe had turned waiting into a strategy in its own right, and everything hinged on the U.S. presidential election in November.

The Democrats chose a younger, more moderate senator, far enough from the last campaign to promise a fresh start with some credibility. When asked if he would bring America back into NATO, he replied that he would immediately convene the allies to consider a new transatlantic security architecture. It was a cautious answer, probably the only one a future president could give before speaking with other governments, and vague enough not to alarm part of the electorate.

It was also too long.

When asked the exact same question, Varden answered in three words: "We won't go back."

Election night was nothing like 2028. This time, Pennsylvania was called early, then Wisconsin, then Arizona, and before the sun

had even risen in Europe, the major networks had already declared Varden the winner, by a wider margin than four years earlier.

That margin, more than the result itself, should have swept away Europe's last illusions. In 2028, it could still be argued that American voters did not know how far the new president would go. By 2032, they had seen it all: the attempt to withdraw from NATO, the defeat in the Senate, the lawsuit, the Supreme Court ruling, the formal withdrawal, and the departure of the troops.

They had seen all this and accepted it. They had reelected him.

Of course, not all of America had changed its mind: tens of millions of citizens had voted against him, and a significant portion of the institutions, the armed forces, and the Republican Party itself continued to regard withdrawal from NATO as a historic mistake. But a democracy does not need unanimity to change course. A majority is enough.

To end that class, I showed the students two photographs side by side on the screen.

In the first, taken in Washington on April 4, 1949, representatives of twelve countries were signing the North Atlantic Treaty at a long, dark wooden table. Europe still bore the wounds of World War II, and the United States was accepting, with a decision destined to change the course of the century, that European stability was also part of American security.

The second photograph was from 2032. It showed a now-empty hangar at a German base, the tarmac gleaming with rain, and two technicians busy dismantling, bolt by bolt, an American sign that was no longer needed.

There were no dead, no ruins, no convoys fleeing. That was what made the image feel final. It did not show a defeat. It showed the end of a presence that for generations had seemed permanent.

In January 2033, during his inaugural address for his second term, Varden devoted a few words to Europe, almost in passing. The United States, he said, would remain friends with the European nations, ready to intervene whenever a fundamental American interest was threatened.

It was not isolationism. It was freedom of choice.

For Washington, it meant that a piece of paper signed more than eighty years earlier would no longer compel a future president to risk war simply because someone had crossed a European border. For Europeans, it meant that, for the first time since the end of World War II, their security depended on an American assessment that could only be made after a crisis had begun, not before.

Over time, the old system had become so familiar that Europeans ended up mistaking it for geography. This was perhaps our deepest mistake.

Mountains are geography. Seas are geography. Alliances are not.

In 2028, enough Americans began to wonder whether the choice made after 1945 still made sense. In 2031, the United States left NATO. In 2032, they reelected the man who had led them out. Only then did Europe realize that it would not be enough to wait for another president, another Congress, or a new shift in the mood of American public opinion. There was no further turning point waiting around the corner.

America had come home.

CHAPTER III

The Island

During the class on the United Kingdom, I drew the outlines of Great Britain and continental Europe on the blackboard and deliberately left an exaggerated gap between them. One student noticed almost immediately and pointed out that the English Channel was not that wide. I told him I knew, and went on drawing the outline of France as if that distance were the correct one.

At the end of the class, I went back to that drawing and erased almost all the sea I had added.

"The problem with Britain," I said, "was that back then, a lot of Britons believed all this space really existed."

At its narrowest point, the English Channel is just over twenty miles wide. Over the centuries, that distance had helped to stop armies. It had never stopped ideas, crises, or wars.

In 2029, London began to forget that.

That year's general election came at the end of a Labour government that had worn itself out more quickly than its leaders had expected.

Nothing had happened that was clear-cut enough to be named as the sole cause of the crisis. The economy was growing slowly. Inflation had fallen from its worst levels, but prices had not come

down, and wages had only partially recovered the ground they had lost. The National Health Service was still one of the country's great sources of pride, and one of its main sources of frustration. Immigration dominated an increasing share of the debate, especially where the strain on housing and services was most evident.

There was also a political weariness, harder to measure: after years in which the Conservatives and Labour had accused each other of betraying the country, a growing number of voters had begun to suspect that the problem might lie with both parties.

The outgoing prime minister, Daniel Mercer, was fifty-eight, and had the temperament of someone who saw politics as a profession in which competence should, sooner or later, be rewarded. An economist by training, he had been a minister before taking over the Labour leadership and then the government in the last stretch of that Parliament. He spoke clearly, knew his briefs, almost never improvised, and possessed the rare ability to answer the question he had actually been asked.

It was also part of his weakness. Part of the country had stopped looking for precise answers. It wanted someone as angry as it was.

The Conservatives had chosen Jonathan Reeves, a fifty-one-year-old lawyer and MP for a Surrey constituency. He spoke of fiscal discipline, security, business, and border control, but he carried a handicap he could not shake: whenever he promised to change the country, someone would remind him that his party had governed it for most of the preceding years.

Then there was Martin Farren. He was fifty-nine. He had been an entrepreneur in the logistics sector, then a television commentator, and finally an MP for Reform for Britain. He had a quality his opponents called superficiality—until they discovered how

effective it was. He could reduce issues that took up fifty pages of a government report to a single sentence that stuck.

Farren was not calling for a second Brexit, because the first was now settled. He argued that the United Kingdom had left the European Union to regain the right to choose, and that this principle should also apply to foreign policy and defense.

Reform for Britain had emerged as a populist, national-conservative force, the heir to the political era ushered in by Brexit. It called for stricter control of immigration, fewer international constraints, lower taxes, and a stronger defense, and it had built much of its support by presenting itself as an alternative to both the Conservatives and Labour.

That campaign produced the slogan that would come to define the Farren government: "Britain decides."

Farren insisted on the need to increase military spending, strengthen the Royal Navy, and invest in submarines, missile systems, cyber defense, and nuclear deterrence. He was not proposing a disarmed country, or one turned in on itself. What he rejected was the idea that having more strength meant agreeing in advance on when to use it.

In the summer of 2029, James Varden had not yet withdrawn the United States from NATO, but he had already made it clear that he considered the Atlantic Alliance a structure in need of radical rethinking. Farren turned the American question into a British one: to what extent did being a European power oblige London to treat every crisis on the continent as its own?

The British system is majoritarian: the country is divided into constituencies, and in each one, the candidate who receives the most votes is elected, even without reaching fifty percent. It is "first past the post": you only have to finish first. This means that the national share of the vote does not automatically translate into an

equivalent share of seats. A party can win millions of votes spread across constituencies where it finishes second and still count for little at Westminster. Another can concentrate its support better and win far more seats.

For decades, this mechanism had mainly favored the Conservatives and Labour and made it very difficult for a third party to break through. But there was a precedent. Something similar had already happened in the early 1920s: Labour had gradually replaced the Liberals as the main alternative to the Conservatives, eventually forming its first government in 1924. The two-party system had not disappeared. It had changed one of its key players.

In 2029, the question was whether it was happening again.

Election night began with Labour confident that it could remain the leading party, the Conservatives convinced that they had closed the gap and were competitive again, and Reform for Britain certain only that it would achieve the best result in its history. Shortly after midnight, the results came in from the first constituencies in the north of England, traditionally Labour strongholds. There Farren had built his campaign on closed factories, immigration, and the feeling that London spoke a different language from the rest of the country.

Reform for Britain did not win everywhere. It won enough. At 1:45 a.m., a constituency the Conservatives had held for nearly forty years fell. Twenty-seven minutes later, a former minister lost his seat by fewer than nine hundred votes. At 3:17 a.m., a working-class seat in the Midlands went straight from Labour to Reform for Britain.

The TV projections shifted abruptly. Reform for Britain was rising. The Conservatives were collapsing. Labour held on in the big cities but lost too many marginal seats to reach a majority.

In the sports halls converted into counting centers, returning officers read aloud results that their own sheets, prepared weeks earlier, had not anticipated. Some defeated candidates stayed on stage anyway for the official announcement, beside the opponents who had beaten them, smiling with the stiffness of people who know the cameras are still on.

By four in the morning, no one knew who would govern the United Kingdom.

The final result gave Reform for Britain the most seats, but not an overall majority in the House of Commons. Labour came second, the Conservatives third with their worst result in modern history, while Liberal Democrats, nationalist parties, and independents occupied the rest of the chamber.

Farren had won the election without having enough MPs to govern on his own. Mercer had lost, but not so badly that he was forced, at that moment, to leave Downing Street. Reeves, politically devastated by the defeat, still had a parliamentary party big enough to decide which of the two opponents would have the votes to govern.

For almost three days, the country was without a clear majority. Mercer formally remained at Downing Street while the parties sought an agreement, and Buckingham Palace did what the British monarchy does when politics comes to a standstill: it waited.

In the end, the Conservatives broke the deadlock. Farren offered them a confidence-and-supply arrangement: no formal coalition, but votes or abstentions on confidence motions and the Budget. In return, he accepted some of the Conservatives' priorities on defense and immigration and promised that he would not seek an institutional rapprochement with the European Union. Jonathan Reeves realized that a deal with Mercer risked handing the entire right-wing electorate over to Reform for Britain for good. He

resigned as leader. A few hours later, the Conservative parliamentary party announced that it would not prevent the formation of a minority government led by Farren.

Mercer then went to Buckingham Palace and tendered his resignation. Less than an hour later, Martin Farren's car passed through the same gates.

When he emerged, he was prime minister. Outside Number 10, hundreds of reporters were waiting.

"Britain," he said, "has voted to choose again."

That evening, two opposing interpretations appeared in the newspapers. For some, it was the completion of Brexit. For others, it was the beginning of something much bigger.

They were both right.

In the early months, Farren was careful not to turn his victory into a war on every institution he had criticized at once. He reaffirmed the United Kingdom's commitment to nuclear deterrence, announced an increase in military spending, and authorized programs for the Royal Navy, air defense, and electronic warfare. He spoke of the United Kingdom as a maritime, nuclear, and technological power, linked to the United States, Canada, and Australia by relationships that no continental structure could replace.

The first test was not NATO. It was Ukraine.

Farren had laid the groundwork during the campaign, without ever openly promising to cut off aid. He had spoken of empty arsenals, of missiles delivered abroad while the Royal Navy was calling for new defense systems, of a British army that could not be turned into the permanent warehouse of a war whose duration and outcome London did not control.

Once in Downing Street, he did not wait months. Within a few weeks, he halted authorization for new multi-year programs and ordered that no weapon system considered essential to British

capabilities could be transferred abroad without fresh government approval. Deliveries already promised continued for a while, but within a few months, the flow dropped dramatically.

The official slogan was: "Britain's defence first."

By the end of spring 2030, London had completely stopped sending offensive systems to Kyiv. Farren defended the decision in the House of Commons: "My duty is not to ensure that the Ukrainian army has enough weapons. It is to make sure that the British Army has them."

The opposition protested. Some Conservatives protested along with it. But in the polls, most voters approved.

It was a signal that Kyiv understood much better than Brussels.

The first serious confrontation for the new government came from the very armed forces it was funding. Sir Thomas Redmayne, Chief of the Defence Staff, was a sixty-three-year-old general, the son and grandson of officers, a man who rarely spoke in public and was listened to when he did.

Giving evidence to the Commons Defence Committee, he was asked by a Labour MP whether the United Kingdom could reduce its involvement on the continent without weakening its national security. Redmayne did not directly criticize the government. He did something more effective. He spoke about geography.

"At its narrowest point," he said, "the Channel is just over twenty miles wide."

Another MP asked whether he meant to challenge the government's policy.

"No. I am simply reminding the committee of a distance."

Then he added: "British history does not teach us that the sea separates us from Europe's problems. It teaches us that, sometimes, it only gives us more time before those problems become ours too."

The line dominated the debate for days. Farren waited before responding, and when he did, at a party conference, he avoided attacking the general. He started from the same premise, granted that it was true, and drew the opposite conclusion, one that suited him better.

"Sir Thomas is right," he said. "The Channel is not wide. But it is wide enough to remind us that we are an island. It does not make us immune to what happens in Europe. But it gives us something the continent often lacks: the time, and the freedom, to decide when a European problem should also become a British one."

The hall applauded.

Redmayne and Farren were looking at the same map and drawing opposite conclusions from it.

London had never needed to rule the continent. But more than once, it had needed to stop anyone else from dominating it. It had done so against Louis XIV, against Napoleon, against Imperial Germany, and then against Hitler. Britain had financed coalitions, used its navy, and fought on the continent not because it wanted to belong to it politically, but because it knew that a Europe controlled by a single power would eventually threaten the island as well.

In 1940, the sea had bought it time. It had not granted it immunity.

In 2030, Farren turned that same distance into a different political argument: not a guarantee of security, but a space that allowed the United Kingdom to choose when, how, and to what extent to get involved in European crises.

That was when Adrien Delcourt's name began to travel beyond the corridors of Brussels.

Not because he had taken center stage in the way that usually happens to men destined for prominence. Almost nothing in his

career suggested that he would become a central figure in European politics. He had not won a spectacular election, he did not lead a large country, and he did not have his own party. When he was chosen to lead the European Commission, many heads of government had welcomed his appointment with the relief reserved for compromises that excite no one and, for that very reason, frighten no one either. That was partly why he had been chosen. In Paris, controllable. In Berlin, reliable. In Madrid, harmless. In Rome, almost irrelevant.

At the time, no one imagined that this very ability to alarm no one would become one of the reasons for his strength.

Belgian, sixty-one, a professor of constitutional law before he entered politics, then justice minister in his own country, and a member of the European Parliament. Delcourt had built his career on the least spectacular side of power: negotiations, documents, meetings that began when the photographers were already leaving. He spoke four languages without particular elegance and wore suits that always seemed to have been bought a few years earlier. He wore reading glasses and had a habit of taking them off when he was about to say something that no one had prepared for him.

When his appointment was announced, the British press devoted only a few lines to him. One paper called him "the man nobody vetoed."

In the years that followed, that description would prove to be unintentionally prophetic.

When Delcourt took over as President of the Commission at the end of 2029, Europe's balance had already begun to crack. Western support for Ukraine was dwindling, and the transatlantic relationship had entered a phase of uncertainty that would have seemed unthinkable just a few years earlier.

The consequences of those choices, however, were not yet fully apparent. The institutions continued to function, the leaders continued to meet, and the allies still used the language of the old agreements. Delcourt took office in that limbo: much had already changed, but almost no one yet knew how much.

His first instinct was not to present a new European architecture, but to find out how much political room was left to build one. He began to talk with governments separately, to distinguish the positions stated in public from those that emerged in confidential conversations, and to identify the point beyond which each would consider it impossible to back down. Out of those conversations, little by little, came the proposal for the summit he was preparing.

Delcourt called the major European capitals, met with prime ministers who had been describing their positions as incompatible for months, and had his staff work on different versions of the same plan. He did not want a text that was perfect in the abstract; he wanted a text that every government could accept without having to explain, once back home, that it had given ground on what mattered. So the proposal shifted its emphasis depending on who was across the table, while keeping the same basic structure.

In June 2030, when Delcourt judged that he had narrowed the gaps enough to put everyone in the same room, he convened his first summit on European security.

Almost everyone arrived convinced that it would fail. Delcourt included.

The difference was that, for him, failure did not necessarily mean going home empty-handed.

The Commission's plan was the most ambitious presented up to that point: joint procurement of armaments, a permanent fund for ammunition, a European air-defense network, a planning command, and a rapid reaction force. No one called it a European army.

Delcourt had enough experience to know that, in politics, a project can sometimes be killed by its name before anyone even discusses its content.

Delcourt also invited the United Kingdom to the summit.

Farren arrived in Brussels knowing that he would accept neither a European command nor a force subject to decisions that London could not control.

The exchange between the two took place in front of the assembled delegations and was later reconstructed by several people in the room.

"We left the European Union so that British decisions would be made in London," Farren declared. "We will not come back in through the barracks door after walking out through the door of Parliament."

It was a line built to cross the Channel before the summit was over.

Delcourt did not answer right away. He took off his glasses, placed them on the papers in front of him, and looked at Farren.

"No one is asking you to give up British sovereignty, Prime Minister."

Farren nodded. "Good."

"I'm asking you," Delcourt continued, "what you intend to do with it when you are left alone with it."

"We will use it to make decisions in the interests of the United Kingdom," Farren replied.

"But deciding for yourselves and being able to act on your own are not the same thing."

"That is why alliances exist," Farren replied. "To cooperate when interests align. Not to decide for governments."

Delcourt nodded slowly.

"And when they do not fully align?"

"Then everyone must retain the right to choose how far to go."

"Even if, in a time of crisis, that choice comes too late?"

Farren held his gaze.

"It will still be a British decision."

For a few seconds, no one spoke.

Delcourt understood that Farren would go no further.

On the main point, Farren did not budge. The United Kingdom rejected any mechanism that could automatically turn a European decision into a British military commitment.

Other governments also raised objections. The rapid reaction force was not approved, and the joint command lost most of the powers that Delcourt had envisioned. The most ambitious project—one that could have resembled the beginning of a truly integrated European defense—did not pass.

If the summit had been judged solely on that basis, it would have been a failure.

But Delcourt had also prepared for what would happen if the main plan failed. Over the following hours, he separated what could not be approved from what no government had reason to block. Joint procurement survived. The ammunition fund was expanded and made permanent. Some countries agreed to coordinate a larger share of military production. A common spending program for air defense was approved and, above all, so was a standing planning mechanism that let member states prepare scenarios and assess needs together without committing them in advance to fight.

Even London signed up to certain industrial and intelligence provisions, enough to be able to claim at home that it had not rejoined any European structure.

It was not the European army that some had envisioned. Nor was it what Delcourt had asked for when he entered the room. But when the summit ended, Europe had more shared ammunition,

more industrial coordination, and a structure in which even governments that no longer fully trusted one another still prepared together.

In retrospect, that summit would look like one of the last times Europe managed a defense agreement of any substance. In the years that followed, some measures continued to be approved, but each time they were a little less substantial and increasingly difficult to secure.

Farren returned to London, claiming to have defended British sovereignty. He was right.

Delcourt remained in Brussels, claiming that he had, for the time being, prevented European security from being definitively divided into separate systems. He was right, too.

That was when many began to see what Delcourt's real talent was. He did not necessarily turn a no into a yes. He made sure that after a no there was still something left to build on.

When Washington gave formal notice of its withdrawal from NATO, which would take effect a year later, the news split London at once. Mercer, now Leader of the Opposition, asked the government to use that year to build a new security system together with those European countries willing to take part. The Conservatives proposed instead a NATO without the United States but with a strengthened British-French command.

Farren rejected both proposals. The United Kingdom, he promised, would remain in NATO. But membership, he made clear, would not take from the British government and Parliament the decision on how to respond to a crisis. Nor, he added, did London intend to take the lead.

On December 18, 2031, the United States formally ceased to be a member of NATO. In London that evening, all eyes were on Farren. Along with France, the United Kingdom had the largest

armed forces in Europe and one of the continent's two nuclear deterrents, as well as a relationship with Washington that no other European government could match. Many hoped that the prime minister would use that moment to declare that London would help, at least in part, to replace the American guarantee.

Farren moved quickly to strip that moment of any significance beyond what London was willing to concede.

"Remaining in NATO," he said, "does not mean promising that Britain will do everything tomorrow that the United States did yesterday."

Around the same time, London signed an agreement with Washington that the British press soon dubbed the Atlantic Compact. It strengthened cooperation on intelligence, submarine technologies, cyber defense, North Atlantic security, and nuclear programs. The Farren government presented it as proof that the United Kingdom could maintain a privileged relationship with the United States without subordinating its policy to a continental structure.

It was, at least initially, a major political success. The White House treated London differently from Brussels, British companies gained access to American military programs, and the relationship between the intelligence services remained very close.

But there was one thing the agreement did not contain: an automatic American guarantee of British security.

For some time, the issue remained merely theoretical.

In March 2032, London discovered how much weight could lie in what the agreement had left unwritten.

It happened over the Baltic Sea, during a mission that, at least initially, was nothing out of the ordinary. For years, Baltic radars had been picking up Russian military aircraft approaching areas monitored by NATO: sometimes these were reconnaissance

flights, other times they were flights carried out without transponders or with minimal communications. Allied fighters would scramble, identify the aircraft, escort it for a while, and then return to base. It had become one of those rituals by which two adversaries watched each other just enough to remind each other they were still there.

That afternoon, something went differently. Estonian radars detected a Russian military aircraft approaching NATO airspace without responding to communications, and two British Typhoons, deployed as part of NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission, were scrambled. One of the two pilots was Callum Hartley.

For the first few minutes, the mission followed a familiar pattern. The Typhoons reached the area, identified the Russian aircraft, and kept the prescribed distance, while communications with ground control continued as normal. Then a second Russian fighter appeared on the radars and approached rapidly.

The recordings released later could not account for every second with the same precision. London claimed that the Russian aircraft had carried out a deliberately aggressive maneuver. Moscow spoke instead of a British course correction that had brought the two aircraft too close. On one point the two accounts agreed: for a few seconds, their trajectories overlapped in a space that was too confined.

There was no missile, no order to open fire, and, according to the recordings made public, not even an explicit threat over the radio. There was a maneuver. Then, contact.

Hartley's Typhoon sustained damage to its right wing. The plane began to lose stability and altitude almost immediately. The pilot tried to correct the aircraft's attitude, but within seconds it became clear that he would not be able to bring it back to base. The ejection seat fired at low altitude.

On the radar, the plane's symbol remained visible for a moment. Then it disappeared. The pilot's did not: it was descending toward the sea.

For six hours and forty-eight minutes, no one knew whether Callum Hartley had survived. The sequence of those minutes was later reconstructed through radio communications, radar tracks, and reports from the rescuers. An Estonian helicopter was dispatched to the last known position.

In London, the loss of the Typhoon had been reported almost immediately. While the search continued in the Baltic, uncertainty at Downing Street now centered on two things: Hartley's condition and what had actually happened in the few seconds before the plane went down. Farren was in a meeting on the economy when one of his aides handed him a brief update. He read it, asked a quiet question, then left the room.

For those few minutes, not even the government had a complete picture. A British plane had crashed. It had happened during an encounter with Russian aircraft. It was not yet clear whether Hartley was alive. Above all, it was still unclear whether what had happened should be considered an accident, a deliberate provocation, or something that already went beyond that distinction.

Half an hour later, the Ministry of Defence issued an initial statement confirming the loss of a British Typhoon during an interception over the Baltic Sea and specifying that search operations for the pilot were underway. It did not assign blame. Moscow did the same.

Then came the news that Hartley had been spotted at sea. He was alive.

The Commons sat late that evening. Mercer rose from the opposition benches.

"Mr Speaker, if the investigation were to establish that the Russian aircraft deliberately brought down one of ours, will the Prime Minister tell the House whether the government would treat that as a hostile act against the United Kingdom?"

Farren replied that he would wait for the investigation's findings. Mercer did not sit down.

"What if Russia were to invade Estonia tomorrow?"

The Speaker tried to quell the noise rising from the chamber. Mercer continued.

"Will the Prime Minister send British soldiers?"

This time, Farren did not seek refuge in ambiguity. He placed both hands on the dispatch box.

"No."

The House erupted. Farren waited. When the noise subsided, he continued.

"I will not send young Britons to die in a war with Russia just because someone in Moscow crossed into Estonian airspace in the east."

Shouts erupted from the opposition benches. Mercer tried to intervene, but Farren raised his voice.

"If the United Kingdom is attacked, this government will defend it by every means. If our vital interests are threatened, we will react. But I will not promise today that a territorial crisis in the Baltic must automatically escalate into a war between two nuclear powers."

This time, silence fell of its own accord. Mercer looked at him for a few seconds.

"Then what is NATO for?"

Farren answered without hesitation.

"To cooperate when our interests align. Not to decide for us when we must die."

It was probably the most important moment in British foreign policy of those years. Farren had not left NATO. But he had said publicly which war he would not promise in advance.

The international investigation failed to prove that the Russian pilot had deliberately caused the incident, and Moscow expressed regret for what it called a "dangerous chain of maneuvers." The crisis came to an end.

Politically, Farren emerged stronger: he had refused to promise war, and war had not come. It was imperfect proof. But politically, it was overwhelming.

In November 2032 came James Varden's reelection in the United States, and with it the end of any hope that the American withdrawal was a passing phase. For Farren, it was a confirmation. He called the American president that night, becoming the first European head of government to congratulate him. The following day, he declared that "the West did not need more bureaucracy, but strong nations that freely chose to cooperate."

His supporters interpreted the American victory as proof that the movement that began with Brexit had not been a British exception, but the start of a new way of conceiving Western sovereignty.

Delcourt read it differently. In a speech to the European Parliament three days later, he said that for years, Europeans had debated how much power to transfer to common institutions, based on the assumption that the fundamental issue of security had already been resolved elsewhere.

"Now," he said, "that is no longer the case."

Then he added: "We can continue to debate how much Europe we want. In the meantime, geography will continue to determine how much Europe we need."

Farren responded the following day during Prime Minister's Questions. An MP asked him if he felt that had been aimed at him.

"No," he said. "Geography is exactly why we are an island."

There was laughter and applause. It was a good line.

British history told a more complicated story. For centuries, the island had tried to remain far enough from the continent to keep its autonomy and close enough to stop anyone from growing strong enough to threaten it.

Farren did not abolish that tradition with a law. He simply made it less convincing.

First, he reduced aid to Ukraine because Britain needed the weapons. Then he rejected a European defense because British decisions had to remain in London. Then he turned Article 5 from a political promise into a national assessment. Finally, during the Baltic incident, he demonstrated that a crisis could be resolved without declaring in advance what the United Kingdom would do next time.

Each of those decisions made sense.

That was the problem.

Farren had not disarmed the United Kingdom. He had done almost the opposite: more military spending, a better-funded Royal Navy, new missile programs, an intact nuclear deterrent, and a privileged relationship with Washington.

British power was real. What had become less certain was when London would use it, and for whom.

At the end of that class, I showed the students a map from 1805, then one from 1914, then one from 1939. In all of them, Britain was in the same place.

I changed the slide to 2032. Still in the same place.

"So what changed?" I asked.

One student replied that the alliances had changed. Another said that the United States had changed. A girl at the back of the classroom looked at the map longer than the others.

"What the British thought it meant to be an island."

I added nothing. There was no need.

The English Channel had not widened by a single inch. But on the other side, they had already begun to act as if it had.

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