JOHN BRIGHT was the greatest of all parliamentary orators. He had many political successes. Along with Richard Cobden, he conducted the campaign which led to the repeal of the Corn Laws. He did more than any other man to prevent the intervention of this country on the side of the South during the American Civil War; and he headed the reform agitation of 1867 which brought the industrial working-class within the pale of the constitution. It was Bright who made possible the Liberal Party of Gladstone, Asquith, and Lloyd George; and the alliance between middle-class idealism and trade-unionism, which he promoted, still lives in the present-day Labour Party. Yet his noblest work, as certainly his greatest speeches, were made in a campaign which failed—a campaign which brought him much unpopularity and led finally to a mental collapse: his opposition to the Crimean War. His attitude caused him to lose his parliamentary seat at Manchester in 1857 and so severed his political connection with this City for ever. Bright blamed the merchant princes of Manchester for his defeat; and it is therefore especially fitting that we should look again at Bright’s stand during the Crimean War on a foundation established to commemorate one of the greatest of these merchant princes.

I have personal reasons, too, for this gesture of atonement. At Bright’s old school, where I was educated, there was an annual prize for a Bright oration; and I have heard his great speeches against the Crimean War recited a score of times in the school-library which bears his name. Myself, as usual, in revolt against my surroundings, I sought only something to Bright’s discredit and proposed to offer one of his speeches against the Factory Acts. But these were not included in his collected speeches; and I was not used, as I am now, to going
through the columns of old Hansards. I therefore remained silent; and it is only now, thirty years later, that I come to repeat the greatest sentences ever uttered in any parliamentary assembly. I am not, however, concerned to defend Bright, much as I now admire him. I have also learnt to admire the diplomatic skill and judgement of "the aged charlatan", Palmerston. Bright said of him:

I regard him as a man who has experience, but who with experience has not gained wisdom—as a man who has age, but who, with age, has not the gravity of age, and who, now occupying the highest seat of power, has—and I say it with pain—not appeared influenced by a due sense of the responsibility that belongs to that elevated position.

I do not think that any historian, who has examined the record of Palmerston's foreign policy, would now endorse that judgement, though he would still be struck by Palmerston's jocular self-confidence and even occasionally by his levity. It is my intention—and I can say in all sincerity that I did not know when I started how the conclusion would work out—to examine Bright's criticism of the Crimean War in the light of later events and of the more detailed knowledge which we now possess, rather than to vindicate or condemn him.

When I began this enquiry, I was struck and indeed surprised by the material for my theme. I have some experience of public agitation on issues of foreign policy. I have sat on committees for Aid to Spain or Czechoslovakia or for Anglo-Soviet friendship; I can remember vaguely the pacifist movement of the First World War. I expected to find the same hubbub of public meetings, pamphlets, letters to the press, articles in newspapers and periodicals, which serve as the undertone for debates in Parliament. Gladstone used all these weapons in his attacks on Disraeli's eastern policy only twenty years later. Indeed, he did better than we. He used to stick his head out of the railway-carriage and address waiting crowds at every station he passed through. Here was Bright engaged in the greatest political conflict of his career; yet he used none of the means that we should think essential. He did not write a pamphlet; he did not address a single letter to the newspapers. He wrote one letter to Absalom Watkin, designed for publica-
tion and stating his case against the war, on 29 October 1854, when the war had already been raging for six months. He attended in all three public meetings, over a period of nearly two years; and all in Manchester. They were designed to explain his attitude to his constituents, not to appeal to public opinion. The first, held on 18 December 1854, was organized not by Bright, but to declare against him. Neither he nor his opponents could get a hearing. At the second, on 5 April 1855, he spoke for an hour. The third was held on 28 January 1856, after the peace preliminaries had been signed. Bright, speaking for two hours, defended his past conduct and collapsed at the end. Thus he made one public speech against the war while it was on; and this was to a limited audience.

We have therefore to look solely at Bright’s speeches in the House of Commons. And here is another surprising thing. He never spoke against the war before it was declared. Let me refresh your memory with some dates. The diplomatic conflict between Russia and the Western Powers, Great Britain and France, began at Constantinople in May 1853. Russian forces occupied the mouth of the Danube in July. The allied fleets passed the Straits in October; they entered the Black Sea in December. Throughout all this time there are only two passing references to the crisis in Bright’s diary, one at the end of May, one in July. In October he addressed a conference of the Peace Society, but mainly on generalities with little reference to immediate events. Early in 1854, the crisis grew graver; on 27 March war was declared. Again Bright remained silent. On 15 March he wrote a letter to Lord Aberdeen, the Prime Minister, not for publication, arguing in favour of peace. His first speech was on 31 March, four days after the declaration of war. It was a speech to clear his conscience, not to change the course of policy. “I am unwilling to lose this opportunity... of clearing myself from any portion of the responsibility which attaches to those who support the policy which the Government has adopted.” At the end, he strikes the same note:

For myself, I do not trouble myself whether my conduct in Parliament is popular or not. I care only that it shall be wise and just as regards the
permanent interests of my country, and I despise from the bottom of my heart the man who speaks a word in favour of this war, or of any war which he believes might have been avoided, merely because the press and a portion of the people urge the Government to enter into it.

Bright did not speak again on the war until 22 December 1854. This speech, too, was vindication, not advocacy—vindication this time more of Cobden, who had been attacked by Lord John Russell, than of himself. And there is the same note of clearing his conscience:

Let it not be said that I am alone in my condemnation of this war, and of this incapable and guilty Administration. And, even if I were alone, if mine were a solitary voice, raised amid the din of arms and the clamour of a venal press, I should have the consolation I have to-night—and which I trust will be mine to the last moment of my existence—the priceless consolation that no word of mine has tended to promote the squandering of my country's treasure or the spilling of one single drop of my country's blood.

In February 1855, negotiations for peace—abortive, as it turned out—were opened at Vienna. On 22 February, Bright made a short speech, appealing for an immediate armistice if the negotiations showed promise of success. Though this speech contains his most celebrated oratorical passage—the Angel of Death has been abroad throughout the land—it had a practical aim; and for once Bright addressed both Palmerston and Lord John Russell in conciliatory, friendly terms. Finally, when the negotiations at Vienna had failed, Bright spoke again on 7 June. He argued that the proposed peace-terms would have been satisfactory and that there was no purpose in continuing the war. But this time he did not merely protest or clear his conscience. He appealed to the House to revolt against Palmerston's government and against the bellicose press:

If every man in this House, who doubts the policy that is being pursued, would boldly say so in this House and out of it, it would not be in the power of the press to mislead the people as it has done for the last twelve months. . . . We are the depositaries of the power and the guardians of the interests of a great nation and of an ancient monarchy. Why should we not fully measure our responsibility? Why should we not disregard the small-minded ambition that struggles for place? and why should we not, by a faithful, just, and earnest policy, restore, as I believe we may, tranquility to Europe and prosperity to the country so dear to us?
Thus Bright spoke in all only four times on the war in a period of nearly two years. Only his first speech and his letter to Absalom Watkin stated his case against the war at length. Indeed we may say that his reputation as an opponent of the war was gained as much by silent and sustained disapproval as by his speeches. Before I discuss his criticism of the war, I should like to turn aside for a moment to consider why Bright was relatively so inactive—so much more silent, for example, than at the time of the American Civil War a few years later. In part, he felt it hopeless to contend against the war-fever of the press. Cobden felt this even more strongly. He said in 1862:

I was so convinced of the utter uselessness of raising one's voice in opposition to war when it has once begun, that I made up my mind that so long as I was in political life, should a war again break out between England and a great Power, I would never open my mouth upon the subject from the time the first gun was fired until the peace was made.

This is a surprising tribute to the power of the press, the more surprising when one reflects that the total newspaper-reading public in England did not at that time number 100,000. Perhaps this is itself the explanation. In 1854 Bright sat for a middle-class constituency and thought only of his middle-class voters. His only public speech was an explanation to his constituents, not a general appeal. After 1858, when he sat for Birmingham, he addressed himself to working-class opinion, regardless either of the middle-class voters or the middle-class press. Indeed, it was the Crimean War which helped to set Bright on the democratic path. To adapt George III's phrase to William Pitt, it taught him to look elsewhere than the House of Commons, or even the electorate, for the will of the people.

Of course, this was not new to Bright. He was always more of a man of the people than Cobden. Cobden lived in Sussex, a failure as a business-man. Bright never moved from Rochdale, next door to his mill. Their paths diverged after the repeal of the Corn Laws. Free Trade had always been an international cause for Cobden—witness his triumphal tour of Europe in 1846; and he went on to preach international arbitration and disarmament. Bright had been interested in the practical issue
of cheap bread; and he turned from Free Trade to Parliamentary Reform—a course of which Cobden disapproved. This led Bright largely to ignore foreign affairs. It is no accident that Cobden spoke in the great Don Pacifico debate in 1850 and Bright did not—it was not his subject.

The early Radicals thought in terms of criticizing the established government, not of superseding it. Witness again Cobden’s remark that he could have had a great career in the United States, but that it was useless for him to harbour ambition in aristocratic England. Bright and Cobden assumed that England was fated to endure aristocratic misrule for many years—Cobden supposed at least during his lifetime. But Bright gradually moved to the more constructive position that aristocratic rule could be ended and democracy take its place. His last Crimean War speech contains a first statement of this new attitude. Yet, even now, it was the promise of a political leader of the right views from within the closed circle which gave him greater hope. This leader was Gladstone, after his resignation from Palmerston’s government at the beginning of 1855. Here was the first hint of the alliance between Gladstone and Bright which triumphed in 1868—an alliance in which Gladstone was the statesman and Bright the agitator.

Bright therefore learnt his way slowly in foreign affairs, beginning with a few radical prejudices and gradually examining the practical issues. Observe: I do not say Quaker prejudices. Though Bright spoke often—as anyone would—of the horrors and bloodshed of war, he never used pacifist arguments against it. Indeed, he was not a pacifist. He supported the forcible suppression of the Indian mutiny; and he urged the North to continue the American Civil War to decisive victory, when even Cobden favoured compromise. Bright doubted, I think, the relevance of Quakerism to public life. Dr. Trevelyan remarks casually that Bright never spoke in Meeting, but draws no moral from it. Perhaps only someone of Quaker stock and upbringing can appreciate its significance. The Society of Friends was still “quietist”, concerned with the inner light, not with social duty; and, in addition, there was a distinction between “ministers” and other members of the Society which has now almost dis-
appeared. I do not say that Bright ever ceased to regard himself as a full member of the Society; but he thought that, by entering politics, he had made himself the humblest of members and, conversely, he kept Quakerism out of his politics. Or rather, though he kept out Quaker principles, he used Quaker methods. His speeches, for all their oratory, rely on fact and argument as much as on emotional appeal. As Bright said in answer to Palmerston: "I am not afraid of discussing the war with the noble Lord on his own principles. I understand the Blue Books as well as he"—a claim that was fully justified.

Though Bright did not condemn war from pacifism, he certainly condemned it on grounds of economy. His Crimean War speeches all speak of the disturbance to trade and the increase of taxes. He has often been blamed for this. Tennyson wrote at the time of

The broad-brimmed hawker of holy things,
Whose ear is cramm'd with his cotton, and rings
Even in dreams to the chink of his pence.

I should add, in fairness to Tennyson, that there is much other internal evidence in Maud to suggest that the hero, or narrator, of it was mad. Sir Llewellyn Woodward, who refers to "the prosy and, at times, repellent religiosity of his letters and diaries", discredits Bright with the comic quotation: "Our carpet trade grievously injured by war raising the price of tow." Sir Llewellyn Woodward, I suspect, had heard that Bright was in the cotton trade and did not appreciate that John Bright and Bros. manufactured carpets, as they still do. What therefore more natural than that he should make a business note in his private diary? Bright showed during the American Civil War that he could rise above arguments, addressed to his economic interests or those of Lancashire. The story of Bright's commercialism, which brings together not only Tennyson and Sir Llewellyn Woodward but such strange companions as Palmerston and Karl Marx, springs largely—as Bright himself said—from the inability to answer his more serious arguments.

In any case, it is well to bear in mind the composition of the House of Commons, in which Bright delivered his speeches. Neither of the two great parties—the Conservatives under
Disraeli nor the Whigs led, if that is not too dignified a term, by Lord John Russell—neither had a majority. The balance was held by the Peelites—the remnant of those Conservatives who had followed Peel over Free Trade in 1846—and the radicals. These last two had much in common so far as economic doctrine was concerned, despite their difference of social background. The government of Lord Aberdeen, which began the Crimean War, was a coalition of Peelites and Whigs, with one radical member, Molesworth, and possessing radical support. Palmerston’s government, which took its place in 1855, was Whig and radical, the Peelites in uneasy and discredited neutrality. To whom then was Bright to appeal, if he was to achieve a practical effect at all? Not to the Conservatives; for, though they claimed to oppose Palmerston, Bright had an incurable distrust of Disraeli. Remember his reply when Disraeli said to him after the “Angel of Death” speech: “I would give all I ever had to have made that speech you made just now.” “Well, you might have made it if you had been honest.” He could not appeal to the Whigs. He regarded Russell and Palmerston as the principal authors of the war and directed his main arguments against the Whig doctrine of the Balance of Power. Besides, the Whigs had a long record of frivolity and incapacity in regard to finance.

Hence, his practical object was to persuade the Peelites and radicals to take advantage of their balancing position. They could bring the Whigs to heel if they wished to do so. His economic arguments were designed for the Peelites, as were his recollections of Peel himself. “I recollect when Sir Robert Peel addressed the House on a dispute which threatened hostilities with the United States—I recollect the gravity of his countenance, the solemnity of his tone, his whole demeanour showing that he felt in his soul the responsibility that rested on him.” This appeal certainly had its effect on Gladstone, particularly after his resignation from office in February 1855. But Bright had to appeal especially to the radicals and Free Trade liberals—his former allies who had now abandoned their principles of economy for the sake of fighting a war of liberation against Russia. This is an essential point, one lost sight of in
later years, when the Eastern Question came to be regarded as bound up with the route to India. The route to India had nothing to do with the Crimean War. The Danube, not the Suez Canal, was the only waterway involved. The Crimean War was fought much more against Russia than in favour of Turkey. And it was fought not only in the name of the Balance of Power. Russia was regarded as the tyrant of Europe, the main prop of "the Holy Alliance"; and English radicals thought that they were now getting their own back for the Russian intervention which had helped to defeat the revolutions of 1848. The veteran radical, Joseph Hume, who had moved a reduction in the army estimates every year since 1823, voted for the estimates in 1854. There could be no more striking evidence of the radical conversion.

The radical crusading spirit against Russia could be illustrated in a thousand ways. I will limit myself to one quotation from a correspondent of Cobden's:

This, then, is my creed. I look upon Russia as the personification of Despotism—the apostle of Legitimacy. In the present state of Poland and Hungary we see her work. . . . Such a power can be curbed only by war, and must be so curbed sooner or later, if Europe is to remain free. . . . If we believe that God wills the liberty and happiness of mankind, how can we doubt that we are doing God's work in fighting for liberty against aggression?

Perhaps I should add that this is a genuine quotation from a letter of November 1855, and is not taken from yesterday's newspaper. Bright's principal arguments were directed against this radical enthusiasm. Why was he not affected by it? It was, I think, a lesson learnt from Cobden. Cobden had always preached non-intervention in European affairs. What is more, he had always looked with a friendly eye on Russian expansion. In a pamphlet which he wrote as early as 1836, he asked: "Can any one doubt that, if the Government of St. Petersburg were transferred to the shores of the Bosphorus, a splendid and substantial European city would, in less than twenty years, spring up in the place of those huts which now constitute the capital of Turkey?" In this pamphlet Cobden even challenged the radical predilection for Poland. Russian rule, he wrote, "has been followed by an increase in the amount of peace, wealth,
liberty, civilization and happiness, enjoyed by the great mass of the people. . . . The Polish people, though far from prosperous, have enjoyed many benefits by their change of government.

Bright had not always shared Cobden's view. As a young man, he wrote a poem in favour of Poland—a very bad poem—which he once quoted with startling effect in a parliamentary speech. But he came in time to accept Cobden's belief that Free Trade would civilize every country, including Russia, and that political freedom would follow of itself. He wrote to Cobden in 1851, at the time of Kossuth's visit to England:

I shall go against any notion of fighting for Hungary or any other country. . . . By perfecting our own institutions, by promoting the intelligence, morality and health of our own country, and by treating all other nations in a just and generous and courteous manner, we shall do more for humanity than by commissioning Palmerston to regenerate Hungary by fleets in the Black Sea and the Baltic.

He struck the same note in April 1854: “They confound the blowing up of ships and the slaughter of thousands with the cause of freedom, as if there were any connection in matters wholly apart”. This was a clear doctrine of non-intervention, applicable to all wars of intervention anywhere at any time—applicable, for instance, as much to Italy as to the Balkans. But, in regard to the Crimean War, Bright did not really take a purely neutral attitude. Not only did he think that nothing good could be achieved by a victory over Russia; he thought that good would be achieved by a Russian victory over Turkey. He dismissed all claims that the Ottoman Empire had reformed, or was capable of reform; and he referred to “the natural solution” —“which is, that the Mahomedan power in Europe should eventually succumb to the growing power of the Christian population of the Turkish territories”. Observe that he does not refer to the national conflict between the Balkan peoples and their Ottoman rulers; and indeed he seems to have been unaware at this time that Turkey-in-Europe was inhabited by peoples of different, indeed conflicting, nationalities. He anticipated the establishment in Constantinople of “a Christian state”. The Christian population would “grow more rapidly in numbers, in industry, in wealth, in intelligence, and in political
power". Why did Bright believe this? He knew no more about Turkey than anyone else. No independent reporters had visited Turkey; and Bright took his information on conditions there from the Blue Books. His faith in the Balkan Christians rested solely on dogma—above all, on the dogma that they were more capable of absorbing the lessons of Free Trade. The dogma was well-founded. All the same, there is a striking contrast with the discussions on the Eastern Question later in the century—discussions which were based on reliable first-hand information and on awareness of the national issue.

Bright claimed to approach the Crimean War with detachment; in reality he came to it with his mind made up. First he was against the war; then he discovered the arguments to justify his opposition. But this is perhaps to anticipate what should be a conclusion. Let me turn to the arguments which he used. It will, I think, be convenient to put them into two categories, though Bright did not make this logical distinction: arguments against any war over the Eastern Question—perhaps even against any war at all—and arguments against this particular war, arguments based on the Blue Books which recounted the diplomatic events of 1853. Incidentally, here is a practical reason why Bright only spoke so late in the day. The first Blue Book was published on 17 March 1854. Bright spoke against the war a fortnight later. He could not have made his case earlier. This speech gives Bright's main arguments against the war; and I shall analyse it in detail.

He begins, quite rightly, with the French demands of 1852 in favour of the Latin Church at Jerusalem. Then, he says, Russia "required (and this I understand to be the real ground of the quarrel) that Turkey should define by treaty, or convention, or by a simple note, or memorandum, what was conceded, and what were the rights of Russia". Turkey, he insists, was decaying; and Russia was bound to "interfere, or have a strong interest, in the internal policy of the Ottoman Empire". This Russian interference was, of course, the mission of Prince Menshikov to Constantinople. Here Bright makes his first substantial point. On 5 May 1853, according to him, Lord Stratford de Redcliffe, British ambassador at Constantinople, insisted that the Turks
should refuse the Russian demands. "He urged upon the Turkish Government the necessity of resistance to any of the demands of Russia, promising the armed assistance of England, whatever consequences might ensue." He makes the same point in the letter to Absalom Watkin. "But for the English Minister at Constantinople and the Cabinet at home the dispute would have settled itself, and the last note of Prince Menchikoff would have been accepted. . . . Lord Stratford de Redcliffe held private interviews with the Sultan, insisted on his rejection of all terms of accommodation with Russia, and promised him the armed assistance of England if war should arise."

Here then is the start of Bright's case. The Turks wanted to sign the Menshikov note; the French government did not object; "it was through the interference of Lord Stratford de Redcliffe—acting, I presume, in accordance with instructions from our Cabinet, and promising the intervention of the fleets—that the rejection of that note was secured." On the basis of Bright's argument Stratford de Redcliffe has been branded with responsibility for the war from that day to this. But does our later knowledge confirm the accusation? I am afraid it does not. Firstly, there was never a secret interview of 5 May; and Bright himself subsequently dropped the story. Far from encouraging the Turks to resist, Stratford advised them to meet the Russian demands fully over the Holy Places; he took a different line only when Menshikov demanded the recognition of a Russian protectorate over all Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire. The Turks would have resisted this claim with or without Stratford's advice—which was, in any case, directed to compromise, not rejection; and even now he gave them no promise at all of British support. Moreover, Russia's demands were not as innocent as Bright made out. Menshikov wanted to make Russia supreme at Constantinople—"to end the infernal dictatorship of this Redcliffe" and to put that of Russia in its place. The Russian claims were based on an interpretation of the treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji, which the Russian experts themselves knew to be false; and in the following year the Tsar Nicholas I admitted that he had not realized what he was doing. "His conduct in 1853", he said, "would have
been different but for the error into which he had been led." The Russians were, in fact, demanding a protectorate over Turkey; and the Turks were bound to refuse, if they were to keep their independence at all. Of course, Great Britain could have washed her hands of Turkish independence; but this was not Bright's case at this stage. He claimed that the Russian demands were harmless. Stratford judged better.

At all events, Menshikov failed. Russia broke off relations with Turkey and, in July, occupied the Danubian principalities. Bright called this "impolitic and immoral" in his letter to Absalom Watkin; he did not condemn it in his parliamentary speeches. The other Powers—England, France, Austria, and Prussia—then drew up in August "the Vienna note" which they offered as a settlement of the quarrel. It was accepted by the Russians in, says Bright, "the most frank and unreserved manner". The Turks had not been shown the Note beforehand. When it reached them, they saw at once the interpretation that Russia would place on it and refused it. This certainly reflected sadly on the diplomatic gifts of the negotiators at Vienna. But surely the question is—were the Turks right in their suspicions? Nesselrode, the Russian Chancellor, proved that they were. Early in September, he issued an interpretation of the Vienna Note, claiming that it gave to Russia the full protectorate over the Orthodox Christians allegedly stipulated in the treaty of Kutchuk Kainardji. What does Bright say to this? Merely, "I very much doubt whether Count Nesselrode placed any meaning upon the Note which it did not fairly warrant, and it is impossible to say whether he really differed at all from the actual intentions of the four Ambassadors at Vienna". Again, "this circular could make no real difference in the note itself". Now this was being more Russian than the Russian themselves. In October the tsar met Francis Joseph, Emperor of Austria, at Olomouc—the place which was then called Olmütz. He confessed that Nesselrode had made a "forced interpretation" and now offered to withdraw it. In other words, the Russians had tried to cheat, and the Turks had caught them out; but no one would deduce this from Bright's speech.

The meeting at Olomouc offered the one serious chance of
avoiding war. Nicholas I was alarmed and in a conciliatory mood; he withdrew, for the time being, the demands that he had previously made. The British government rejected his offer; they insisted that the Russian troops should be withdrawn from the principalities; and, when Turkey declared war independently a couple of weeks later, they allowed themselves to be dragged into war on her side. Bright had a strong case here. He would have said to the Turks: "If you persist in taking your own course, we cannot be involved in the difficulties to which it may give rise, but must leave you to take the consequences of your own acts." But he weakens this case irremediably when he says a few sentences previously: "It is impossible fairly to doubt the sincerity of the desire for peace manifested by the Emperor of Russia." This is just what it was possible to doubt from the record of the previous months. Desire for peace perhaps; but equally a desire to get his own way at Constantinople even at the risk of war. Bright failed to allow for the suspicions which Russian policy had caused and for the Russian aggressiveness which the hesitation and muddle of British policy encouraged. Indeed, the war would have been avoided if Great Britain had followed the resolute line advocated by Palmerston and Russell—whom Bright blamed for the war. The responsibility for the war lay with the pacific Lord Aberdeen, whom Bright admired; and Aberdeen later admitted it himself. Like King David, he refused to rebuild a church on his estates. "But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Thou hast shed blood abundantly and hast made great war: thou shalt not build an house unto my name."

So much for Bright's criticism of the diplomatic background to the Crimean War. But his criticism did not stop at diplomatic detail; indeed, this was not much more than a tour de force designed to show that he could meet ministers on their own ground. In reality, Bright did not accept this ground; he rejected the basic assumptions of British diplomacy. The major part of his speech of 31 March 1854, shows this. He turns from the Vienna Note and the Olomouc meeting to challenge the doctrine of the balance of power. He has great fun quoting the opinions of the great Whigs—Burke, Fox, and Lord Holland—
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against any idea of supporting Turkey; opinions that must have much embarrassed Lord John Russell, the last of the great Whigs, yet an enthusiastic supporter of the Crimean War. Bright continues: "If this phrase of the 'balance of power' is to be always an argument for war, the pretence for war will never be wanting, and peace can never be secure." "This whole notion of the 'balance of power' is a mischievous delusion which has come down to us from past times; we ought to drive it from our minds, and to consider the solemn question of peace or war on more clear, more definite, and on far higher principles than any that are involved in the phrase the 'balance of power'." This last sentence seems to promise that Bright will at any rate hint at an alternative foreign policy; but he does not do so. He merely goes on analysing the excuses for the Crimean War and demolishing them.

The integrity and independence of the Ottoman Empire? But Turkey cannot be independent with three foreign armies on her soil. If the government had wanted to preserve the independence of Turkey, they would have advised the Turks to accept either Menshikov's conditions or the Vienna Note. "I will not insult you by asking whether, under such circumstances, that 'integrity and independence' would not have been a thousand times more secure than it is at this hour?" This was exactly the argument—if you will forgive a contemporary allusion—with which Lord Halifax justified the desertion of Czechoslovakia in 1938: "I have always felt that to fight a war for one, two, or three years to protect or recreate something that you knew you could not directly protect, and probably could never recreate, did not make sense."

Next, what about curbing Russian aggression? Bright answers that it cannot be done. "Russia will be always there—always powerful, always watchful, and actuated by the same motives of ambition, either of influence or of territory, which are supposed to have moved her in past times." "It is a delusion to suppose that you can dismember Russia—that you can blot her from the map of Europe—that you can take guarantees from her, as some seem to imagine, as easily as you take bail from an offender, who would otherwise go to prison for
three months. England and France cannot do this with a stroke of the pen, and the sword will equally fail if the attempt be made."

Finally, "how are the interests of England involved in this question? . . . It is not a question of sympathy with any other State. . . . It is not my duty to make this country the knight-errant of the human race, and to take upon herself the protection of the thousand millions of human beings who have been permitted by the Creator of all things to people this planet." On the other hand, taxes have gone up, trade is injured, thousands of men are being killed. "My doctrine would have been non-intervention in this case. The danger of the Russian power was a phantom; the necessity of permanently upholding the Mahometan rule in Europe is an absurdity. . . . The evils of non-intervention were remote and vague, and could neither be weighed nor described in any accurate terms. The good we can judge something of already, by estimating the cost of a contrary policy." (These two sentences are from the letter to Absalom Watkin, but they fit in with the argument of Bright's speech.) Finally, Bright moves on to assert the general merits of non-intervention for this country "where her interests were not directly and obviously assailed". If we had adopted non-intervention for the last seventy years:

This country might have been a garden, every dwelling might have been of marble, and every person who treads its soil might have been sufficiently educated. We should indeed have had less of military glory. We might have had neither Trafalgar nor Waterloo; but we should have set the high example of a Christian nation, free in its institutions, courteous and just in its conduct towards all foreign States, and resting its policy on the unchangeable foundations of Christian morality.

Every orator must be forgiven something in his peroration.

The speech of 31 March 1854, which I have analysed at length gives Bright's considered case against the Crimean War. The two speeches of 22 December 1854 and of 23 February 1855, do not add anything to that case. The one, as I said earlier, was a defence of Cobden; the second urged an armistice during the negotiations at Vienna. We can leave them aside when considering Bright's views. If we were considering his oratory, it would be a different matter; for they contain his
most moving and also—a characteristic sometimes forgotten—
his most humorous passages. The speech of 7 June 1855,
however, raises some new points. In it Bright discusses not
the causes of the war, but how it should end. I must turn
aside to explain the diplomatic background. In the autumn of
1854 Austria—not herself a combatant, but wooed by the
western allies—drafted “Four Points” as reasonable terms of
peace. These Four Points were accepted by England and
France in the hope of drawing Austria into the war; then they
were accepted by Russia in the better hope of keeping her out.
The four Powers met in conference at Vienna in March and
April 1855 in order to define the “Four Points” more closely
and to turn them into practical terms. There was no difficulty
about three of them. Russia was to give up her protectorate
of the Danubian principalities; the freedom of navigation of
the Danube was to be secured; and the Christian populations
of the Ottoman Empire were to be put under a general European
guarantee, instead of under that of Russia. Incidentally, these
three Points were already an answer to the assertion that war
accomplishes nothing. Russia would never have agreed to
them without the Crimean War. I don’t venture to determine
whether they were worth a war; but that is a different question.

The dispute at Vienna came over Point III. This provided
that the Straits Convention of 1841 should be revised “in the
interests of the Balance of Power”. In other words, Turkey
was to be given some sort of security against Russia’s naval
preponderance in the Black Sea. Lord John Russell, the
English representative, and Drouyn de Lhuys, the French
representative, went to Vienna with instructions that they could
agree to one of two things: either the Russian fleet in the Black
Sea should be limited, or the Black Sea should be neutralized
altogether. Gorchakov, the Russian delegate at Vienna, refused
to accept either. Buol, Austrian foreign minister, then came
forward with another proposal: equipoise. The Russians could
keep their existing fleet; but, if they increased it, the British
and French could send ships into the Black Sea to balance the
increase. Neither Russell nor Drouyn was authorized to agree
to this scheme; but Drouyn was afraid of missing any chance
of peace, and Russell was afraid of getting out of step with Drouyn. Both therefore accepted "equipoise". But when they returned home, Napoleon III rejected the compromise; and the British government followed suit. The peace conference was abandoned; and the war was renewed. This was a bad, muddled piece of diplomacy. It is hardly surprising that Bright saw his chance and took it.

There is much the same pattern as in the earlier speech of 31 March 1854. He begins by meeting ministers on their own ground and attacking their incompetence; gradually, he shifts his emphasis and moves over to more general principles. He asks what the war is about. It is not a war for Poland or for Hungary or for Italy. It is solely a war—and here he quotes ministers themselves—for the security of Turkey. Very well then, we want to reduce Russian preponderance. "How is that preponderance to cease?" Bright looks first at the idea of neutralizing the Black Sea and dismisses it with vehemence. "I conceive that was so monstrous a proposition, in the present condition of Europe, that I am surprised it should have been entertained for a moment by any sensible man." He says much the same of limiting the Russian fleet. "If any diplomatist from this country, under the same circumstances as Russia was placed in, had consented to terms such as the noble Lord had endeavoured to force upon Russia—I say, that if he entered the door of this House, he would be met by one universal shout of execration, and, as a public man, would be ruined for ever." Bright has an alternative: the Straits should be opened to everybody:

Our fleets would visit the Black Sea in the course of the season, and the Russian Black Sea fleet, if it chose, would visit the Mediterranean. There would be no sort of pretence for wrangling about the Straits; and the balance of power—if I may use the term—between the fleets of Russia, France and England would be probably the best guarantee that could be offered for the security of Constantinople and Turkey, so far as they are in danger of aggression either from the Black Sea or the Mediterranean.

This is a surprising proposal. I say nothing of the fact that Russia would have rejected it emphatically, whatever Gorchakov might hint at Vienna. But Bright, in his eagerness to discredit imposing any terms on Russia—terms that certainly
could only be imposed after her defeat—Bright is reduced in practice to the crudest realpolitik. He says in effect: no treaty stipulations are of any value; the only effective course is to maintain a balance of power, a balance of actual force, by keeping a large fleet in the eastern Mediterranean. If Palmerston had said this, what an outcry Bright would have made; what assertions of Russian good faith; what cries, and justified cries, about the weight of taxes to maintain such a fleet. It has often been said that non-intervention and splendid isolation are luxuries dependent on naval supremacy; but Bright never came so near admitting it as in this passage. His judgement of fact, however, was not correct. Six months after he made this speech the Russians accepted the neutralization of the Black Sea, which he had dismissed as a monstrous proposition. It is true that they denounced it again fifteen years later, when the diplomatic structure of Europe had changed fundamentally. Nevertheless Bright underrated what a Power will agree to when it has been defeated.

The rest of Bright's speech moves away from these diplomatic questions. He points to the folly of saying that Austria must be preserved and yet trying to draw her into a war that would exhaust her; he warns against the danger of relying on France as an ally; he denounces the idea of defending the liberties of Europe:

What a notion a man must have of the duties of the . . . people living in these islands if he thinks . . . that the sacred treasure of the bravery, resolution, and unfltering courage of the people of England is to be squandered in a contest . . . for the preservation of the independence of Germany, and of the integrity, civilization, and something else, of all Europe!

He quotes the things that Palmerston and Russell said against each other in the past. But his greatest emphasis is on the burden of taxation and the crippling effect which this will have in our competition with the United States.

Hon. Members may think this is nothing. They say it is a 'low' view of the case. But these things are the foundation of your national greatness, and of your national duration; and you may be following visionary phantoms in all parts of the world while your own country is becoming rotten within, and calamities may be in store for the monarchy and the nation of which now, it appears, you take no heed.
It may seem a little unfair to end the survey of Bright's speeches on this note; but it is the note on which he himself chose to end and, in the parliamentary circumstances of 1855, perhaps rightly. What are we to say, after this examination, of Bright's attitude towards the Crimean War? We are bound, I am sure, to admire the courage with which Bright expressed his views and still more the brilliance of his performance. If I had merely read to you one of his speeches, instead of trying to analyse them, you would certainly have been swept away and have been convinced, without further argument, that the Crimean War was all that Bright said—unnecessary, unjust, in short a crime. But do we feel the same if we escape from their spell? I have suggested, during the course of this lecture, that Bright was not always sound when he came to the details of diplomacy. It is difficult, when criticizing the government of your own country, not to skate over the faults of other governments; and Bright did not escape this danger. He was harsher towards Stratford de Redcliffe than to Prince Menshikov; professed more faith in the statements of Nesselrode than in those of Palmerston; gave the Russian, but not the British government the benefit of the doubt. There was certainly much muddle and confusion in the diplomacy of the Crimean War; but, to judge from Bright's speeches, you would imagine that it was all on the British side. This one-sidedness is almost bound to happen in parliamentary speeches. You may achieve some effect by attacking your own government; you will achieve nothing by attacking foreign statesmen. In exactly the same way, Charles James Fox was often more charitable towards Bonaparte than towards William Pitt; and pacifists of the First World War, such as E. D. Morel, had more sympathy for German than for British imperialism.

One looks in vain in Bright's speeches for any satisfactory explanation of the causes of the Crimean War. He seems to suggest that it was due solely to newspaper agitation and to the irresponsibility of Palmerston and Russell. "The country has been, I am afraid, the sport of their ancient rivalry; and I should be very sorry if it should be the victim of the policy which they have so long advocated." Cobden was more cautious.
He held that Russia, too, was "much in the wrong"; and therefore kept quiet, washing his hands, as it were, of both sides. Bright often implied that Russian expansion against Turkey was an unexceptionable, even a praiseworthy process. Not always. He said in his first speech: "If I were a Russian, speaking in a Russian Parliament, I should denounce any aggression upon Turkey, as I now blame the policy of our own Government; and I greatly fear I should find myself in a minority, as I now find myself in a minority on this question." But is not this justice a little more than even-handed? Does it not imply that to attack Turkey and to defend her are equally reprehensible and provocative? If Russian aggression, though deplorable, is inevitable, then is not resistance to this aggression equally inevitable? Or do we make allowances only one way? In the next eastern crisis of 1876-8 Gladstone took a clearer and more consistent line. He held that the destruction of the Turkish Empire in Europe was eminently desirable; and therefore he wished Russia to succeed, preferably in association with England. Though he opposed the actual course of British policy, he offered a positive alternative. Bright's attitude was one of aloof neutrality.

He was not clear about this himself. In a speech to the Peace Society, which he made on 13 October 1853—before the Crimean War broke out—he attacked the idea of war "for the miserable, decrepit, moribund Government which is now enthroned, but which cannot long last, in the city of Constantinople". Surely the logical conclusion from this should have been to co-operate in the Concert of Europe, as Gladstone later advocated. But Bright always denied that he favoured the Russian cause; and in a later speech on foreign policy, which he made on 29 October 1858, preached high-minded isolation. This country should have "adequate and scientific means of defence".

But I shall repudiate and denounce the expenditure of every shilling, the engagement of every man, the employment of every ship which has no object but intermeddling in the affairs of other countries.

He refused to admit that an active foreign policy could ever be justified. "This foreign policy, this regard for 'the liberties of
Europe', this care at one time for 'the Protestant interests', this excessive love for the 'balance of power', is neither more nor less than a gigantic system of out-door relief for the aristocracy of Great Britain." All foreign policy was unnecessary. Instead "we have the unchangeable and eternal principles of the moral law to guide us, and only so far as we walk by that guidance can we be permanently a great nation, or our people a happy people".

When Bright said this, he had left Manchester and was already the representative of Birmingham. This was symbolic. Though he seemed discredited while the Crimean War was on, he triumphed afterwards. By 1858 he was back in the House of Commons; and his version of the Crimean War was already being accepted. English people usually think their wars a mistake, when they are over; and they thought this of the Crimean War sooner than usual. As a matter of fact, it achieved its purpose rather better than most wars. Russia's control of the Danube mouth, which was the largest issue in the war, was recovered only in 1945; and Turkey, whose demise has been so often foretold, possesses Constantinople and the Straits to this day. I do not venture to say whether these achievements are desirable. Bright, however, said that they were impossible. Most Englishmen soon came to agree with him. It is Bright's version of the Crimean War which has triumphed in popular opinion and in the history books. Bright had more success. Once it was agreed that the Crimean War had been a mistake, it was easy to draw the further conclusion that all wars were a mistake. The moral law which Bright invoked turned out to be the doctrine of the man who passed by on the other side. It is no accident that Bright, at the end of his life, had Joseph Chamberlain as his colleague in the representation of Birmingham. There was a continuity of ideas from Bright to Joseph Chamberlain; and from Joseph Chamberlain to Neville. The Munich settlement of 1938 was implicit in Bright's opposition to the Crimean War. I am not sure whether this condemns Bright's attitude or justifies Munich.