The special relationship 1945-1990: myth or reality?

The “special relationship” between Britain and the United States is largely intangible and unquantifiable. It may even on occasions be hidden from the public gaze. It is therefore not easy to define exactly what it is, or indeed to distinguish the myth from the reality. Most descriptions or definitions of the special relationship focus on the “sentimental” area of shared language and values, and on the “functional” areas of cooperation in the realms of defence, intelligence, and foreign policy elite interactions. The “sentimental” ties between Britain and the United States are undoubtedly real though difficult to identify clearly and above all impossible to measure, and the areas of “functional” cooperation provide substantial evidence to suggest that the “special relationship” was a reality during the period studied.

...we can never take Anglo-American relations for granted. But if we work at it, we can preserve a “special relationship,” provided we never say that we have it. (PRO FO 953/2495, 19 August 1966)

In 1950, American State Department officials prepared a brief on Anglo-American relations in which they confirmed their belief that there was a special relationship between the two allies. The Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, was in many ways an anglophile; he had for

example an extraordinarily close working relationship with the British ambassador in Washington, Oliver Franks (Acheson 323-24). Yet when he heard about the paper which his people had produced, he was horrified. All the copies of the document which could be found were burned. This was not, he explains in his memoirs, because he disagreed with the content, but because he felt that any such semi-official recognition of the special relationship would inevitably have a disastrous effect on other countries with which the United States was also keen to foster good relations, and would also provide ammunition for those in the United States Congress who felt the State Department was “the tool of a foreign power” (Acheson 387-88).

The desire for discretion illustrated by this episode is by no means an isolated incident in the history of Anglo-American relations, particularly in the fields of diplomacy, defence and intelligence. It is one of a number of difficulties which make any examination of the reality or otherwise of the special relationship problematic. There is no formal document, no “Special Relationship Treaty,” and the term itself is often either deliberately avoided (Oliver Franks claims the words were never pronounced during his talks with Acheson [Danchev 91]), though it may, on the contrary, be deliberately and almost self-consciously used: Clinton is said to have been reminded by his Public Relations advisers to use the expression to please the British (Seitz 322).

Perhaps at least as problematic is the need to provide some kind of definition of what the expression “special relationship” is understood to mean, both in London and in Washington. What is so special about it? What areas of international relations might plausibly be covered by the term? Who is it special for? Is it equally special for both partners?

Towards a definition

Although the fact that the term was invented by Churchill does not necessarily mean that his understanding of it is the only one or even the right one, it is at least worth examining what he was claiming when he used it. The expression was coined against the immediate historical background of the Second World War, and especially the wartime “Grand Alliance” between Britain and the United States, and the personal friendship between Churchill and Roosevelt which embodied it.

In the House of Commons, in November 1945, he outlined a vision for the future in which a continuation of the Anglo-American “Grand Alliance” of the war would form the core of a new world organisation, though he took pains to specify that this “fraternal association” would not exclude other nations. But there were areas of more exclusive cooperation, especially nuclear. Britain, he told the Commons, “should not abandon [her] special relationship with the United States and Canada about the atomic bomb, and ... should aid the United States to guard this weapon as a sacred trust for the maintenance of peace.”

Churchill returned to this theme on March 5 1946 at Fulton, Missouri. The “sinews of peace” speech he delivered is best known for his warnings
about the “iron curtain” descending over Europe, but it also contains a quite detailed description of what he meant by “special relationship.”

Churchill used the expression to refer above all to cooperation in the realm of defence in general, and on atomic weapons in particular. This, along with intelligence cooperation which was already well established but still very secret, represents in a sense the “hard core” of the special relationship. In short, Churchill was associating the bonds of sentiment (fraternal association) with a more hard-headed or “functionalist” set of motives in which the UK and the USA would agree to cooperate because it was in their mutual best interest to do so.

Many official glosses on the special relationship have done their best to restrict it to those areas of broad sentimental association, on the one hand, and functionalist cooperation over defence and intelligence, on the other. For example, a brief prepared by the Foreign Office in response to a request for information on the subject quoted Churchill’s November 1945 speech to the House of Commons, repeating the usual claims about common language and shared values, but denying that “special” meant “preferential”:

As you will see the connotation of this term has changed during the past 20 years and has been misconstrued to imply that there is some kind of preferential relationship between this country and the U.S.A. This is certainly not our view. The ‘special relationship’ is a fact, e.g. we speak the same language and have the same cultural antecedents; a ‘preferential relationship’ is part of popular mythology and is frequently put up as a cock-shy to enable its detractors to knock it down. (Letter from R.M.K. Slater, Foreign Office, to Rt. Hon. Arthur Henderson, MP, 5 May 1965, PRO FO 371/179574)

It is quite clear that where American and British interests diverge, there is nothing particularly cosy in the Anglo-American association. Indeed there have been a great deal of issues over which there have been substantial disagreements, misunderstandings and sometimes ill-feeling. However, such tensions as there have been tend to reflect disagreements over the way in which a shared objective could best be achieved rather than over the objective itself, or focus on relatively peripheral issues which would not compromise the essential core objective of ensuring the security of the West—or containing Communism—within the context of the Cold War. However the Foreign Office gloss rather understates the extraordinary degree of cooperation on defence and intelligence, and says nothing about the level of cooperation, and even complicity, which a great many participants and observers have identified in dealings between the foreign policy elites on either side of the “pond.”

**Asymmetry**

One essential aspect of the special relationship which needs to be examined is the degree of inequality or asymmetry within the relation-
ship, and the extent to which Britain was prepared to face up to its reduced circumstances. Britain is sometimes held to have been guilty of a kind of refusal to come to terms with reality, hanging on grimly to the memory of past greatness, the unpleasant fact of decline clouded in nostalgia for the Empire. It is suggested that Britain passed from being the great World Power in, say, 1900, probably the zenith of Britain’s strength, to an economically-challenged regional power in the 1970s, without fully realising what had happened. Britain undoubtedly clung too long to the idea that it could remain a Great Power, and the cost involved, both in financial terms (Britain consistently spent a higher proportion of its GNP on defence than most of its competitors) and perhaps in terms of lost opportunities in Europe, though that is far more difficult to determine and measure, was considerable.

Some in Britain were fully aware of its declining power and influence quite early on, but there was no general realisation of just how much Britain had lost in this field until the late 1960s. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War some observers had hoped that Britain would ultimately be able to recover from the economic difficulties the war had created and resume its previous role. Churchill memorably saw great opportunities for Britain as a result of its unique position at the intersection of the “Three Circles” of Commonwealth and Empire, relations with the US and Europe (R. Churchill 417-18), but the balance between those circles, and the exact contribution that Britain should make in each one of them, proved difficult to define. The circles, one might be tempted to say, proved difficult to square. Britain was reluctant to turn wholeheartedly towards the European circle, if that meant turning its back on its world role. For example, at a series of “Bipartite Official Meetings” held in London on 25 April 1950 between Foreign Office and State Department officials the British team asserted that, “The United Kingdom must be regarded as a power with world interests and not merely as a potential unit of a Federated Europe” (Bullen series II, vol. II, 115).

A common strand of thinking for many years after the war was that the loss in real power, measured in purely financial terms, could be compensated for by the greater experience of diplomats, civil servants and politicians. Attlee, for example, wrote to Bevin after meeting Truman in 1950: “throughout these talks the UK was lifted out of the ‘European queue’ and [was] treated as [a] partner unequal no doubt in power but still equal in counsel” (quoted in Danchev 127). However the vast increase in military spending which accompanied Britain’s decision to contribute substantial forces to the nominally United Nations but essentially United States-dominated force operating in Korea seriously compromised Britain’s post-war economic recovery. The traumatic episode of Suez in 1956 made British dependence on the USA—as well as its economic weakness—all too apparent. The “Catch 22” dilemma was that in order to retain Great Power status Britain needed to spend increasing amounts on defence, but to
be able to spend so much on defence it needed to direct more investment into industry, and so spend less on defence. In the aftermath of Suez, the 1957 Sandys Defence Review attempted to downsize Britain’s defence spending, recommending, among other things, an end to conscription.

This did not mean, however, that British foreign policy-makers felt Britain no longer had a role. The Macmillan government opened the 1960s with a major policy document entitled “Future Policy Study 1960-1970,” which focused particularly on Britain’s foreign policy objectives. It did not believe that Britain would become a minor regional power: “...we are much too important a part of the free world to retreat into a passive role like Sweden or Switzerland,” even though it recognised that decolonisation would continue, and that Britain’s economic, political and military power would not grow as fast as those of the United States, the Soviet Union and the EEC. The UK would be a small power alongside these three giants, and China would soon represent a fourth giant. “But,” the report continues,

despite the contraction of our former strength and resources the United Kingdom still has many of the resources of a world Power; and our influence need not shrink in proportion to our material strength. (PRO CAB 134/1929, part III, 23)

By 1964, however, it was becoming impossible to escape the fact that growing economic vulnerability was increasing the inequality in the Anglo-American partnership. In a brief prepared by the Foreign Office in August 1964, entitled “An Anglo-American Balance Sheet,” there are no illusions: “As much the weaker partner, dependent on overseas trade and with world-wide responsibilities, we find American support for our overseas policies virtually indispensable, while they find our support for theirs useful and sometimes valuable” (PRO FO 371/177830/PLA24/7).

One way of solving the problem of maintaining Great Power status without having to pay the full price, it was thought, especially in the late 1950s, was possession of atomic and then thermonuclear weapons. However the price of keeping up with technological developments, which had been affordable so long as more or less conventional bombers were adequate as a “delivery system,” rapidly escalated. This problem came to a head when the British Blue Streak programme was cancelled in 1960, leaving the country without any up-to-date and operational missile system. Macmillan had been promised the American Skybolt missile, which would have prolonged the useful life of Britain’s V-bombers, but when it was announced that this programme was also going to be cancelled Britain found itself completely unable to maintain its position at the top table, which possession of an effective nuclear deterrent seemed to secure. Macmillan had to deploy all his talents when he met the President at Nassau in December 1962 to obtain an agreement with Kennedy that Britain would be sold
Polaris missiles and thus remain in the nuclear race, although dependent on the USA. There was however a price to pay: this agreement on Polaris was probably the determining factor in General de Gaulle’s 1963 veto of Britain’s 1961 application to join the EEC.

These, then, are some of the areas which might reasonably come under the broad heading of the “special relationship”: the broad “sentimental” relationship of common values and language, on the one hand, and the more “functionalist” aspect of Anglo-American relations in the key areas of defence, intelligence and cooperative working practices at the top, on the other. In these specific areas, is the “special relationship” myth or reality?

**Common language and shared values**

The “common language and shared values” dimension can be overstated. True, despite superficial idiosyncrasies like the “tomatoes”/”tom-ah-toes” pronunciation differences which feature in Fred Astaire’s and Ginger Rogers’ famous song, there is clearly a shared language. But Britain and America can be said either to be united by a common language or, as G. B. Shaw put it, divided by a common language. A shared language does not necessarily guarantee an easy-going relationship: it may well facilitate understanding, but it can also make disagreements easier, and perhaps make them more likely to escalate into an all-out row. It might also, of course, make it easier to make up, mend fences and carry on.

As for the idea of shared values, there is again a lot of truth in this. Both countries remain attached to some form of democracy and individual freedoms (though it is not difficult to find examples where the practice has been less attractive than the theory). There are however areas of disagreement too. Most notably there have been substantial tensions over attitudes in the United States towards colonialism. These are now largely a thing of the past, mainly because Britain no longer has any colonies of any major importance, although the issue looked as if it might briefly resurface during the Falklands conflict of 1982. There have also been a whole series of tensions over approaches to trade, particularly where Britain has wanted to continue exporting to countries the United States has wanted to subject to restrictions or embargos, like Cuba in the 1960s. More generally there is a tendency in United States foreign policy to adopt a rather idealistic and absolute line, whereas British diplomacy has a tradition of pragmatic realism. There are other words for both approaches. The idealistic line can sometimes be criticised as inflexible, and pragmatism can sometimes be a euphemism for compromise, unprincipled bargaining or horse-trading. Perhaps a middle power nation like Britain has to be more flexible and pragmatic, though arguably such qualities were at least as necessary during the heyday of Empire, where imperial overstretch made it particularly important to adjust rather than confront. During the Cold War, Britain placed much greater emphasis on détente and
summit meetings with the USSR, while the United States administration tended to adopt a more hard-line stance.

It is not easy either to determine the extent to which the idea of close and special relations between Britain and the United States is shared by public opinion on either side of the Atlantic. What evidence there is, from opinion polls and elsewhere, suggests that opinion may change substantially according to the topical or controversial issues of the moment. There have been times when British opinion has not seen the United States as very reliable. Nonetheless, there is an underlying feeling that if it came to the “crunch,” the other partner in the alliance would still be the most reliable. For example, Gallup asked a British panel in 1975 to say how much they would trust various countries as allies in a future war. The United States came out top of the list, with 45% replying “a great deal” and 37% “up to a point.” France, by contrast, was trusted “a great deal” by 17%, and “up to a point” by 47%, West Germany “a great deal” by 23% and “up to a point” by 38% (Gallup 1411). In a briefing written in September 1967, the Foreign Office suggested that the feeling was reciprocal: “. . . there remains a widespread sympathy and affection for the UK which forms so integral a part of American history: there also remains a recognition that when the chips are down the UK will still prove to be America’s most dependable, perhaps her only real, ally” (PRO FCO 7/771). However, in the early 1970s at least, British public opinion had little confidence in US handling of foreign policy issues (Gallup 1172, 1323).

All in all it can perhaps be provisionally concluded that there is some considerable evidence for the existence of shared values underpinning a close Anglo-American relationship, though public opinion was not uncritical. It remains now to turn to the more substantial areas of cooperation in Defence, Intelligence and interpersonal working relations within the foreign policy elites to look for more “functionalist” evidence of the “specialness” (Danchev) of the special relationship.

Defence, Intelligence and Foreign Policy Elite interaction

Defence

There are several levels of close cooperation between Britain and the United States in the field of defence. Churchill used the term “special relationship” with specific reference to cooperation over the atomic bomb, and this particular area of defence clearly deserves very special attention. It illustrates a mixed verdict for the relationship, with a post-war period of damaging tension, frustration, and fear that the United States might use the weapon irresponsibly, followed by exceptionally close cooperation, leading to almost total dependence. The second area of particular interest for study of the “special relationship” is the way in which the Defence establishments on both sides of the Atlantic seem to have worked closely together, whether or not their political masters were fully aware of what was going on and indeed whether or not they approved, at least officially.
Atomic cooperation

Churchill and Roosevelt had agreed that the knowledge acquired during the Manhattan project would be shared with Britain after the war, as evidenced in the aide-mémoire signed by the two leaders at Roosevelt’s New York home in Hyde Park in September 1944, which provided that “full collaboration between the United States and the British Government in developing tube alloys [the British code name for atomic research] for military and commercial purposes should continue after the defeat of Japan unless and until terminated by joint agreement” (Baylis 136), but despite initially encouraging responses, the United States was reluctant to do so when the time came. Congress wished to preserve the atomic weapon in American hands only, and passed the McMahon Act in 1946 which forbade the dissemination of any atomic know-how. Britain was effectively excluded from any real atomic cooperation until the repeal of the McMahon Act in 1958.

This is distinct from agreements about the deployment of atomic weapons on British soil. In 1948, during the Berlin crisis, Bevin had negotiated the arrival of American atomic-capable bombers, though no atomic weapons were shipped to Britain until 1950 (Aldrich 216). An agreement was made at the Bermuda conference of 1957 to deploy Thor missiles in Britain. These were operated under a “dual key” system which meant that they could only be used if the British Prime Minister agreed. American Cruise missiles were based in Britain from 1983 to 1991, despite prolonged protests, notably by the “Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp.”

In the meantime, the decision had been taken in 1947 to make a British bomb, “with a bloody Union Jack flying on it” as Bevin is reputed to have said. The first British A-bomb was tested in 1952, and the first British H-bomb in 1957. Britain’s weakness, as it turned out, was not so much in making atomic, and then thermonuclear, warheads. Indeed, British development of the H-bomb surprised American observers by its rapidity. As mentioned above it was in the area of delivery systems that Britain was unable to keep pace with the technology, and, after the Nassau agreement at which Macmillan obtained an American undertaking to supply Polaris missiles, Britain became, and remained, dependent on the United States. No other country was given access to Polaris missiles, though Kennedy offered them to France after Nassau in an unsuccessful attempt to deflect de Gaulle’s distrust of the “Anglo-Saxons.”

MoD/Pentagon cooperation

In a speech delivered at Harvard University in September 1943, Churchill referred to the extraordinarily close working relations of the Combined Chiefs of Staff (Churchill, Great Republic 359). When the war ended, the Chiefs of Staff met to discuss their future and decided that they should continue to meet, though they recognised that this
might not meet with the approval of their governments, especially as regards the United States which was keen to accelerate the return to “normalcy.” They consequently decided they would continue to exchange ideas and plans, if not clandestinely, at least under the auspices of various other arrangements for transatlantic discussions (Bullen series I, vol. IV, 93-4). Alex Danchev calls this the “back-room” dimension of defence cooperation, and quotes the Chief of Staff of the US Air Force suggesting Anglo-American collusion in 1950: “Don’t you think we can meet in the back room for the global business and let the French continue in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation?” (Danchev 89).

The most spectacular example of such back-room cooperation was provided by the Falklands conflict in 1982. The Administration was divided as to how to respond to a conflict between two valued allies: Britain, valued as a European partner in the maintenance of Western security against the Communist threat in the East, and Argentina, which had recently become an important ally in the United States’ war against the “Communization” of Latin America. Reagan initially hesitated. He tried to avert the conflict by sending his Secretary of State, General Alexander Haig, on a mission to broker a negotiated peace. In the meantime, he expected the United States to remain neutral. There were some in the Administration, such as the US Ambassador to the United Nations Ms. Jeane Kirkpatrick, who felt that the US should not support Britain in a conflict that could be seen as colonialist and trivial, an unwanted threat to America’s really important “hemispheric” interests.

The United States Defence Department, however, and especially the Secretary for Defence Caspar Weinberger, felt that it was their duty to give Britain every assistance. Accordingly, all manner of logistic support and military equipment was provided immediately and swiftly. Some, such as the latest version of the Sidewinder missile, or the immediate offer to make available the US base on Ascension Island and provide vast amounts of aviation fuel in record time, were of crucial importance. Some observers have suggested that without them Britain would not have won the war; others suggest that while Britain would probably have been able to achieve ultimate victory without this help, the campaign would have been both longer and more costly in terms of casualties. While this help was not entirely clandestine, it seems quite clear that the Pentagon did not go out of its way to advertise the scale of the support they were giving. Cooperation flourished on the existence of long-standing relations not only between the Chefs of Staff but also between officers further down the ranks who, in many cases, knew each other personally. In a recently broadcast BBC documentary, Richard Perle, Assistant Defence Secretary in 1982, asserted that the US aid had been crucial: “It was logistic support, it was intelligence, it was the full range of help, some of which has never been discussed, and I think it’s fair to say that we functioned as if we
were one military institution.” The most dramatic indication of the extent to which the US Navy was prepared to help Britain—and, incidentally, avoid the almost unthinkable eventuality that Britain might lose—came when Caspar Weinberger almost casually offered the British Ambassador Nicholas Henderson an aircraft carrier should one of Britain’s two available carriers be lost (Henderson 443).

**Intelligence**

Intelligence cooperation is inevitably a difficult area to study, since it is generally covered by a shroud of secrecy. Cooperation between British and American intelligence services began during the war under the so-called BRUSA agreement (Britain and United States Agreement, 1943, see Ball and Richelson 137-38, and European Parliament Echelon Report 59-61). This was continued after the war under a new agreement, the UKUSA agreement, signed in 1947 or 1948 and since then developed to form the Echelon intelligence-gathering network which has recently attracted criticism from the European Parliament. Only in recent years has the existence of the UKUSA agreement been officially acknowledged. There are a number of indications that cooperation has remained close, despite periodic alarms about the reliability of British intelligence prompted by the Fuchs, Burgess, MacLean, Philby and Blunt spy cases.

The experience of the Falklands War suggests that, like the defence department, the intelligence agencies were more prompt to assist Britain than the administration wanted or even realized. It would seem that a spy plane flight was diverted to fly over the South Atlantic quite early on (Ball and Richelson 233). Providing satellite information, however, was not something the intelligence services could decide alone, and it would seem that this was only done quite late on in the conflict, against American reluctance to divert the satellite from its usual NATO functions (Nott 274).

An indication of the privileged access to US intelligence which the UK enjoyed is provided in Sir John Nott’s recently published political biography. Sir John Nott, the Minister for Defence under Margaret Thatcher’s first government, reveals that Britain had better access to intelligence material from the USA than her European allies. Discussing the decision to acquire Trident II in 1982, Nott writes:

> I had to explain to all our European allies in NATO, without disclosing the full extent of our knowledge of Soviet developments, why we needed more sophisticated accuracy, penetration and decoy capabilities in order to maintain the credibility of our deterrent in the eyes of the Soviets. Although NATO intelligence briefings to our allies were frequent and wide-ranging, only we, the British, shared the full intelligence picture with the United States. (251)

So here again there has been a “special relationship,” albeit one in which Britain plays a junior role, and one which carries with it the danger of a certain degree of dependence.
Relationships of trust among the elites

Diplomats and civil servants

There is substantial evidence to suggest that relationships between British and American foreign policy elites have frequently been unusually close, and this is often cited as an embodiment of the “special relationship.” I mentioned above the regular meetings between Dean Acheson and Oliver Franks. Some observers have commented on the sheer professionalism of many British diplomats in Washington, who have very often been successful in cultivating an atmosphere of confidence and reliability (see for example Kissinger on Freeman, Kissinger 1979, 95-96).

In the early 1960s the Washington Embassy received requests from the State Department for British officials to prepare policy papers on issues of interest to the United States (Kandiah and Staerck 151, Parsons 136-37). Some British staff in Washington even had a direct input into policy formulation. For example, the Foreign Office Soviet expert Sir Thomas Brimelow drafted important documents for Henry Kissinger in the 1973 discussions on nuclear arms limitation (Kissinger 1982, 278-82). David Ormsby-Gore, the British Ambassador appointed in 1961 on the request of John F. Kennedy himself, was not only a family friend of the Kennedys’ but trusted so much that he became to all intents and purposes a member of the special committee JFK set up to manage the Cuban missile crisis.

Clearly then there have been a number of instances where the relationship between State Department and Foreign Office officials has been remarkably close. It is however very difficult to establish whether this actually had any effect on policy. As Macmillan’s Private Secretary Frederick Bishop wrote to Sir Norman Brook, “...in any case the test of the matter is not whether officials have frequent contacts with their opposite numbers, but whether United States policy decisions pay attention to our interests and our representations” (PRO CAB 21/4411). It has been suggested that the privileged access which the diplomats have often been able to secure has helped them influence the American policy-making process at a sufficiently early stage for such influence to be effective. This may be true, but it seems hard to believe that even the most skilful of diplomats could persuade a superpower to engage in a particular course of action if it did not believe it to be in its interest to do so. Nonetheless such influence might be able to swing the decision one way rather than another when the decision is very finely balanced. The British Ambassador Patrick Dean put this in blunt terms in October 1967:

Certainly under President Johnson, and probably under any foreseeable American President from now on, there is no likelihood of any important line of policy being decided upon in Washington simply out of love and regard for the British and what they mean in the world (though this may occasionally still just tip the balance in our favour) when there is nothing in it for the United States. (PRO FCO 7/771)
Perhaps I could leave the last word on this to Henry Kissinger, a consummate diplomatist who saw close cooperation between foreign policy elites as central to the “special relationship”:

This was, in effect, a pattern of consultation so matter-of-factly intimate that it became psychologically impossible to ignore British views . . . Above all, they used effectively an abundance of wisdom and trustworthiness of conduct so exceptional that successive American leaders saw it in their self-interest to obtain British advice before taking major decisions . . . Britain’s influence was great precisely because it never insisted on it; the ‘special relationship’ demonstrated the value of intangibles. (Kissinger 1979, 90)

Of course, this still does not explicitly answer the question of whether these close working relations actually succeeded in swaying American opinion when it mattered. As to the question of whether the relationship was of any use to the United States, a world-weary Kissinger wrote in a background briefing before the 1969 visit to Europe by Richard Nixon: “My own personal view on this is that we do not suffer in the world from such an excess of friends that we should discourage those who feel that they have a special friendship for us” (Kissinger 1979, 91).

Heads of government

Relationships between heads of government have also often been close, and this undoubtedly has influenced foreign policy. Macmillan’s wartime relationship with Eisenhower was unquestionably an asset in his attempt to re-establish close Anglo-American co-operation after the Suez crisis. However he was probably also helped by other factors, such as the fact that some sectors of the US administration seem to have felt a little guilty or at least uncomfortable about the way the United States had withdrawn its support for its ally at a critical juncture, and by the fact that the successful Sputnik launches worried Americans who suddenly felt vulnerable to attack on their own territory, and therefore valued all the more highly a loyal ally.

Macmillan also seems to have got on remarkably well with Kennedy, although they were in many ways very different—something Macmillan himself had been acutely aware of before he first met Kennedy after he became President. Britain was closer to the US than any other country during the Cuban crisis of 1962. Macmillan and Kennedy (Mac and Jack) spoke to each other on the phone on several occasions. Britain was specially informed of what was going on before any other country. Kennedy specifically told Macmillan that he would phone him before embarking on any radically new action. But that did not mean that he would necessarily take Macmillan’s advice. Nonetheless, Kennedy apparently valued the possibility of sharing his thoughts with Macmillan, relieving the loneliness of power.

And Margaret Thatcher got on famously with Ronald Reagan. On some issues, she was clearly able to influence him. On others, such as
the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, she was spectacularly sidelined, to her intense displeasure. But, as seen above, America, or at least the Defence Department, gave Britain a huge amount of help during the Falklands conflict of 1982, and Margaret Thatcher never forgot it. No doubt her decision to allow US planes to fly from bases in Britain to attack Libya in 1986 was at least partly motivated by gratitude for this crucial help in a time of need.

But other heads of government did not get on at all. Most visibly, Edward Heath never really warmed to Richard Nixon. He was keen to promote Britain’s European credentials, and also may have come to consider meetings with Nixon as less useful in terms of image as the Watergate affair progressed. It must also be said that Heath was not exactly a “warm” kind of man anyway. But Heath was not the only British Prime minister to have difficulties with United States Presidents. In fact they probably all did, though to greater or lesser extents. It would be unusual for that not to be the case for relationships between heads of governments with sometimes conflicting interests. But perhaps it is worth recalling that Churchill was much less successful in his dealings with Truman than he had hoped. Martin Gilbert relates that at times Truman would weary of Churchill’s lyrical outbursts. Despite his best efforts, Wilson never got close to Johnson, at least while he was President. Johnson was reported to have been very blunt as he told Wilson in effect to mind his own business and keep his advice on Vietnam to himself. And of course Anthony Eden did not have much success with Eisenhower. Right from the start he had wished to tie Britain’s foreign policy less closely to that of the United States. In this, at least, he was extremely successful, but no doubt not in the way he hoped. His somewhat emotional response to Nasser was not shared by Eisenhower—and Suez remains today the prime example of what Britain should not do in foreign policy.

Relations between heads of government are thus something of a mixed bag. Yet many of the underlying principles are carried on from one administration to the next, although the complex operation of American administrations means that it is difficult to rely on any such permanence. A Foreign Office brief assessing the prospects for Anglo-American relations after the election of Lyndon B. Johnson told the Foreign Secretary: “With each change of President there is a tendency in Britain to feel that the basic relationship can never be the same; but as time goes by we usually adapt ourselves to the new regime and a satisfactory relationship emerges” (PRO FO 371/179574).

All the above suggests, then, that there was, at least in the areas of defence, intelligence and contacts between foreign policy elites, a degree of convergence of interest, of complicity of working practices and of mutual assistance which can reasonably be interpreted as constituting a “special relationship” between Britain and the United States. As mentioned above, this is not to suggest for one moment that a special relationship has to be an equal relationship.
Nor does any of the above analysis presuppose any particular attitude towards the question of whether the post-war Anglo-American alliance was a “Good Thing” or a “Bad Thing” (to use the ultra simplified criterion proposed in jest by Sellar and Yeatman in *1066 and All That*). The revisionist historian John Charmley is most outspoken in seeing it overall as a Bad Thing. It has been argued that if Britain had expended less energy pursuing a world role after the Second World War it might have been able to devote more resources to industrial investment, if it had been less anxious to secure a “place at the top table” it might have become a more prosperous country and if it had not tried so hard to “punch above its weight” (Douglas Hurd) it might have been able to find a more comfortable place in the world.

There is no doubt in my own mind that Britain lost a number of valuable opportunities to play a founding role in Europe. Whether it failed to grasp those opportunities because of the Anglo-American relationship is another question. After all, the United States tried very hard to encourage Britain to take the leading role in Europe, at a time when it undoubtedly could have done so. The reasons why it did not are more complex than a Churchillian preference for the *grand large* over Europe. Perhaps the Anglo-American alliance became an excuse for not pursuing the European option (Mangold 83).

Equally, the pursuit of Great Power status in, say, the first fifteen years after the Second World War probably placed strains on the British economy which it was unable to cope with. Had the adjustment been made earlier, some of the crises which marked so much of the post-war period might have been avoided. As Peter Mangold writes in *Success and Failure in British Foreign Policy*, “While the American link helped Britain to stave off the impact of decline, the price may have been the damaging tendency to hang on too long to the unsustainable notion that Britain remained a Great Power” (92).

There can be no doubt, however, that, “Good Thing” or “Bad Thing,” there was (and in many senses still is) a special relationship between Britain and the United States. Its scope should not be exaggerated however: the United States has always been in a position to assert its own interests where they have been in conflict with Britain’s. Britain, on the other hand, has far more often been constrained in its foreign policy by the constant need to think of the American dimension to any of its initiatives. This does not mean that Britain became a client state of the United States, nor a satellite, nor even a 49th (or 51st) state. It is perhaps Harold Wilson who, in robust terms, most vividly described the limitations that the relationship imposed in the 1960s: “You can’t kick your creditor in the balls” (quoted in BBC 2002). Britain is now much less reliant on United States financial support than it was when Wilson was at the helm. But cooperation on defence and intelligence, and close working practices in areas of foreign policy, have remained the hallmarks of a genuinely close relationship. Similarly, the two allies continue to share the same language, and the same values. Britain continues to support the United States in
many of its foreign policy initiatives. This may mean that it will continue to be consulted by Washington. It remains to be seen whether this policy of support given publicly in exchange for the ability privately to influence—and, perhaps, temper—foreign policy is still a reality.

Michael PARSONS
Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour

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