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Beyond Essential: Britons and the Anglo-American Special Relationship

Steve Marsh

This article assesses the unsuccessful attempt by US President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron to rebrand the ties between their countries as ‘the essential relationship’. The failure of that initiative revealed the enduring attachment of ordinary Britons to the notion of a UK-US ‘special relationship’ regardless of how accurately it reflected the changing reality of the two nations’ interactions.

Keywords: Anglo-American Special Relationship; Barack Obama; David Cameron; British public opinion

Introduction

This article examines British attitudes towards the US through one of its most (in)famous and debated features, the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’. It takes as its focal point an attempt by Prime Minister David Cameron and President Barack Obama to rebrand Anglo-American relations. Cameron laid the ground for this during his July 2010 visit to Washington when, in the *Wall Street Journal*, he derided an obsession with the atmospherics of the special relationship and stressed instead that ‘This is a partnership of choice that serves our national interests today’.¹ The following May, Obama and Cameron launched the ‘essential relationship’. This more functionally orientated, less emotional, nomenclature tied in well with their modernisation agendas - a signal of which was given at their July 2010 meeting through a carefully choreographed exchange of contemporary art.² It also reflected three important political considerations. First, Obama and Cameron wanted to put UK-US relations on a footing different to the controversial Blair-Bush years. Second, there was a sense that British angst at the Blair government’s apparent lack of influence vis-à-vis the Bush administration had been heightened by the term ‘special relationship’ encouraging unrealistic popular expectations. Finally, the ‘essential relationship’ spoke reassuringly to the functional necessity of cooperation going forwards; mutual utility still breathed life through Anglo-American relations.

Yet, despite these seemingly solid foundations, the ‘essential relationship’ suffered the same ignominious fate as had Prime Minister Edward Heath’s re-branding of the special

relationship as the ‘natural relationship’ some 40 years previous. On both occasions the special relationship struck back with decisive force. Although Obama and Cameron penned a follow-up on the ‘essential relationship’ in *The Washington Post* in March 2012,³ the White House Press release in February 2012 announcing Cameron’s forthcoming official visit to Washington and a state dinner featured only archetypal special relationship prose.⁴ Thereafter, barring an occasional attempt to juxtapose old and new representations of Anglo-American relations as being ‘essential and special’,⁵ the ‘essential relationship’ settled into discursive obscurity.

This article first contextualises the Cameron-Obama discursive modernisation of the special relationship and provides an overview of its reception. It then proceeds to argue that the failure of the ‘essential relationship’ owed substantially to an amorphous but deep British attachment to the special relationship and to the word ‘special’ carrying connotations qualitatively superior to ‘essential’. Finally, it is argued that the fate of the ‘essential relationship’ demonstrates red lines drawn by popular opinion for British governments’ public handling of UK-US relations.

Context

The end of the Blair-Bush years sparked an intense period of reflection upon the special relationship and its management. British public opinion was sore. An ICM poll for *The Guardian* in 2006 reported that 63% of respondents felt Prime Minister Tony Blair had steered Britain too close to the US. Meanwhile, a poll by Populus for *The Times* indicated an unusual swing whereby 65% of those interviewed believed Britain’s future lay more with Europe than with the US. By 2010 Britain’s apparent lack of influence in Washington still rankled. A YouGov poll revealed that 85% of respondents thought the UK had little or no influence on US policies and that 62% believed the US failed to consider British interests.

Government transitions on both sides of the Atlantic reflected and contributed further to this sense of malaise in Anglo-American relations. British politicians were concerned when dealing with the US to avoid ‘doing a Tony’.⁶ Conservative Party leader David Cameron struck an early revised tone in September 2006, telling the British-American Project that Britain needed to rediscover the art of being junior partner to the US so that it avoided

being seen as ‘America’s unconditional associate in every endeavour’ and hence ‘the maximum of exposure with the minimum of real influence over decisions’.⁷ Gordon Brown’s Labour government did similarly. After becoming Prime Minister, Brown visited German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicholas Sarkozy before departing for the US, predictably sparking speculation about a rebalancing of British foreign policy away from the special relationship.⁸ Press and political commentators likewise interpreted a change of leadership interaction style by Brown with Bush at their July 2007 Camp David meeting as signalling a break with the cosiness of the Bush-Blair relationship.⁹

As Democratic presidential candidate, Obama chose Berlin rather than London as the venue for his keynote European address and once elected to office he appeared to keep Brown at a distance. Reports suggested that regular video-links between the White House and Downing Street had been discontinued and that Washington was now uninterested in Britain as an ‘Atlantic bridge’.¹⁰ Grist to this mill was provided by a series of perceived Obama slights against Prime Minister Brown. These included his being shut out of US deliberations in November 2009 about reinforcement of troop levels in Afghanistan, a seemingly desperate 15-minute meeting in a kitchen at the UN building in New York in September 2009, and a gift to Brown of a box set of 25 DVDs that were unplayable in the UK. British tabloid newspaper credit earned by Obama in assuring Cameron upon his becoming Prime Minister in spring 2010 that ‘the United States has no closer friend and ally than the United Kingdom’ swiftly turned to outrage when, in January 2011, the President asserted that ‘we don’t have a stronger friend and stronger ally than Nicolas Sarkozy, and the French people’.¹¹

The British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (HCFAC) poured fuel upon the fire when in March 2010, shortly before that year’s British General Election, it released a report suggesting that ‘the use of the phrase “special relationship” in its historical sense, to describe the totality of the ever-evolving UK-US relationship, is potentially misleading, and we recommend that its use should be avoided’.¹² The report provoked a media storm that, somewhat unusually, blew in the US as well as the UK. Demonstrating a revealing mixture of angst at the report and lingering resentment at perceived lack of US respect for British opinion, *The News of the World* led with ‘UK & US love KO: Special relationship is over so it’s time to stop sucking up to the US, say MPs’. *The Sunday Times* delivered a swift obituary: ‘It’s over: MPs say the special relationship with US is dead’.¹³ Moreover, Opposition parties took up the thrust of the report in advance of the General

Election. Cameron urged that ‘the special relationship should be a frank and a candid one’¹⁴ and the Liberal Democrat manifesto warned of the ‘dangers of a subservient relationship with the United States’.¹⁵ Once elected the coalition government maintained this rhetoric of British reassertion. For instance, Foreign Secretary William Hague promised Britain would pursue a ‘solid not slavish’ relationship with the US.¹⁶

To these problems were added a number of publicly rehearsed irritants to and questioning of Anglo-American relations. Trust within the intelligence relationship was sensitised by the Scottish Executive’s release of the Lockerbie bomber and by the British government’s failure before the UK High Court to prevent details pertaining to the Binyam Mohamed torture case being made public. Reciprocal British concern was sparked by a Wikileaks revelation in February 2011 that as part of a US–Russia arms-control treaty the latter was to be provided with sensitive details on Britain’s nuclear deterrent. Military relations, too, came under pressure. Most important were British defence cuts stemming from a combination of austerity measures and a strategic defence and security review. So severe were these cuts feared to be that both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made public interventions.¹⁷ In addition, retrospectives upon military performance and tactics in Iraq and Afghanistan stoked tensions. For instance, Wikileaks released US diplomatic cables that reported US General Dan McNeill, leader of NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2007/08, to be “‘particularly dismayed by the British effort’” and convinced that “‘they had made a mess of things in Helmand, their tactics were wrong’”.¹⁸ Conversely British officers blamed civilian deaths caused by US over-reliance on air strikes for compromising confidence-building measures in Helmand.¹⁹ Also, Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster accused American forces of exacerbating problems in Iraq through cultural arrogance, over-reliance on technology, and inability to recognise the special challenges of counter-insurgency warfare.²⁰

This, then, is the context in which the ‘essential relationship’ was launched. Obama, Brown and Cameron had all sought to distance themselves from the Blair-Bush years. All, too, held office during blowback from the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns and amid frictions felt on both sides of the Atlantic about elements of UK-US functional cooperation. Meantime, the HCFAC had challenged the modern appropriateness of the term special relationship and British public opinion evidenced clear angst at the Bush administration’s

apparent reneging upon the traditional Anglo-American deal of British influence in return for the sacrifice of blood and treasure.

It is worth considering, therefore, how Cameron and Obama painted the ‘essential relationship’ against this backdrop of UK-US relations. In a joint article in *The Times* in May 2011 they argued that:

when the United States and Britain stand together, our people and people around the world can become more secure and more prosperous. And that is the key to our relationship. Yes, it is founded on a deep emotional connection, by sentiment and ties of people and culture. But the reason it thrives, the reason why this is such a natural partnership, is because it advances our common interests and shared values. It is a perfect alignment of what we both need and what we both believe. And the reason it remains strong is because it delivers time and again. Ours is not just a special relationship, it is an ‘essential relationship’ – for us and for the world.²¹

There was no strong break here with past formulations of UK-US relations. Shoulder to shoulder imagery was invoked, interests and values were presented as entwined, and cultural ties were duly acknowledged. The emphasis on the relationship’s repeated delivery offered reassurance, too, that its utility was still recognised in Washington as well as in London. Furthermore, pronouncement of the ‘essential relationship’ was not presented as being mutually exclusive with the special relationship. Rather, ‘essential’ read in this form as indispensable and the relationship was accorded global relevance. Still, though, media reception was a combination of hostility, bemusement and, ultimately, lack of interest. After an initial flurry of commentary there was a swift and widespread reversion to regular and indiscriminate use of the term ‘special relationship’ as shorthand for all things Anglo-American and to micro-analysis of the atmospherics of the relationship and of Prime Minister-President relations. So quick was the *status quo ante* restored that it was almost as if neither the HCFAC recommendation not to use the term ‘special relationship’ nor the Cameron-Obama ‘essential relationship’ had ever existed.

Word puzzles

‘It doesn't really matter whether someone calls it “the special relationship” or not’.²² This was the – probably soon regretted – response of a British Foreign and Commonwealth Office spokeswoman to the media furore that accompanied release of the HCFAC report on Anglo-American relations. Everyday practitioners within UK-US relations likely sympathised with her position. Sir Christopher Meyer famously banned the term from the Washington Embassy and Sir Jeremy Greenstock, former British Ambassador to the UN (1998–2003), testified before the HCFAC that ‘British officials do not use the term “special relationship”’.²³ However, beyond policymaking circles the nomenclature special relationship has long been used as shorthand for not just functional Anglo-American cooperation but also for the much broader myriad of familial, business, historical, intellectual, cultural and identity connections that exist between the US and UK. Media reception to the HCFAC report, and to the ‘essential relationship’, reveals a tension between these practitioner and popular readings of the special relationship that can, under certain circumstances, morph into conflict.

The source of this tension can be traced to Churchill’s articulation of the special relationship in his 1946 ‘Iron Curtain’ speech at Fulton, Missouri.²⁴ This was no simple call for alliance against the Soviet Union; Churchill knew such a call would play badly in the US and, in any case, he had greater ambitions of the ‘fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples’. He needed to influence popular as well as elite attitudes towards Anglo-American cooperation and to create a position of privilege for Britain at the top table of post-war powers despite its wartime impoverishment. An ‘essential relationship’ would not meet such aspirations, not least because its connotations of functional cooperation were unlikely to capture the popular imagination and potentially suggested contingent rather than privileged and enduring British relations with the US. Rather, Anglo-American relations needed to be elevated beyond normal run of the mill international relationships.

‘Special’ is an obvious marker of something beyond the ordinary; the mundane is elevated discursively to a higher significance. Churchill did this to Anglo-American relations at Fulton via a discourse targeted primarily at bringing policy actors into sharing his view of special UK-US relations. There was an element too, though, of communicative discourse whereby Churchill sought to convince Anglo-American publics of the naturalness of their mutual affinity. At the heart of fraternal association lay consequently a mutually supportive mix of interest and sentiment crafted skilfully from a very selective reading of history.

Nowadays Anglo-American relations experience a depth and breadth of interpenetration arguably greater than any other relationship between two major states. This intermeshing has been characterised as a layered cake or coral reef; personal leader relations sit at its apex, bureaucratic interweaving in the middle and public-level cultural interactions at the base.²⁵ Evidently these layers are generally mutually supportive, as is the blend of interest and sentiment. However, it is also the case that interest and sentiment are likely to appeal with different strengths to different constituencies within the coral reef. Likewise, interest and sentiment often respond to different stimuli. Generally speaking, ties of sentiment might be expected to change less rapidly and respond less directly to particular events than do interests and the policies designed to secure them.

At the base of the coral reef UK-US cultural interactions are extensive, amorphous and include a vast array of actors spanning multi-national corporations through to individuals. Their unusual strength and diversity are often seen as a key source of the special relationship's stability and capacity to weather storms such as the Suez crisis and periodic poor leadership relations. Meantime, the contingent nature of interests is reflected in the need perceived by British policy actors to revise periodically their presentation of the special relationship in response to events and circumstances. For example, Churchill's enunciation of the special relationship was strongly bilateral, exclusive and privileged, reflecting the distribution of power within the western alliance at that time and his aspirations to harness American power to British ends. In the 1970s, the likes of Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson still set Anglo-American relations apart from functional alliances, arguing that the special relationship was 'based to a large extent on an identity of view and purpose over a wide area of world problems'.²⁶ However, he also rejected notions of an exclusive special relationship; these antagonised third parties and were objectively unsupportable given British relative decline and growing international interdependence: 'In this inter-dependent world it [the special relationship] can flourish only in a wider association...'²⁷ Hereby Wilson maintained a special quality to UK-US relations but also 'democratised' them by making their health contingent on 'wider association'.

These observations tell us important things about the 'essential relationship'. First, it was almost inevitable that this descriptor would encounter opposition or disdain. Churchill had discursively elevated Anglo-American relations to a higher order and thereafter the communicative discourse of special Anglo-American relations had been consistent and

widely accepted by the British public – consciously and subconsciously. The ‘essential relationship’, by contrast, with its much more functional and pragmatic connotations appeared to downgrade Anglo-American relations. Second, the need for a discursive reconstruction of Anglo-American relations was not shared throughout the coral reef because operative understandings of the special relationship differed. For Obama and Cameron, the ‘essential relationship’ was a tool of modernisation; it drew a political line under the Blair-Bush years and sought to de-sentimentalise UK-US relations by emphasising functional cooperation and mutual utility. However, broader constituencies were more accustomed to reading the special relationship as shorthand for the multiplicity of unique UK-US connections and in its historical context as a blend of interest and sentiment. Many things in life are popularly perceived to be essential but compared to special it downgrades volition, a sense of wanting. It also potentially encompasses negative as well as positive possibilities. A visit to the dentist may be essential but rarely is it special.

Summits and specialness

The pronouncement of the ‘essential relationship’ was made immediately before Obama and Cameron met for a bilateral summit meeting in London in May 2011. While it was not clear from the language used in their newspaper article exactly how an ‘essential relationship’ differed from a special relationship, there was no confusion about the timing of the pronouncement. An established tradition within Anglo-American relations of such summit meetings ensured that what Obama called a shared ‘especially active press corps’²⁸ would scrutinise the event in forensic detail. This media coverage would be important in relaying the new elite message of the ‘essential relationship’ to mass audiences. How the media received and interpreted the ‘essential relationship’ would thus also be highly significant in shaping mass reception of it.

However, unveiling the ‘essential relationship’ in this way was a double-edged sword. Media coverage was guaranteed but Anglo-American summits fall squarely within the tradition of the special relationship. Churchill is credited with introducing the term summit to the lexicon of international diplomacy and was instrumental in establishing regular bilateral Anglo-American summits as a platform upon which to showcase the special relationship to the world.²⁹ From Churchill’s meeting with President Harry Truman in Washington in

January 1952 onwards, bilateral summit meetings became an expected feature of Anglo-American diplomacy and a symbol of their international distinctiveness. Carefully choreographed photo opportunities of presidents and prime ministers ‘à deux’ at the summit provide some of the most iconic and popularly memorable images of the special relationship. They also offer a touchstone between times present and past. As Gideon Rachman, for example, notes ‘Every time a British prime minister visits Washington, he knows that he will be measured against sepia photos of previous “special relationships” between British prime ministers and US presidents: Churchill and Roosevelt, Thatcher and Reagan, Blair and Bush.’³⁰

Summits are also expected sites of Anglo-American homage to the special relationship. Leader greetings, speeches and press conferences at and in the wings of these summits enable ritualistic rehearsal of the tropes of ‘specialness’ – Anglo-American joint heritage, common language, shared norms and so forth. These are vital to the ongoing animation of the special relationship and are routinely honoured, even when leadership relations are not necessarily warm. For instance, relations between President Clinton and Prime Minister Major were reportedly conducted on a ‘grin and bear it’ basis,³¹ not least because of the former’s grant in 1994 of a visa to Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams to visit the US. Yet the following year Clinton stood before the Houses of Parliament to bestow fulsome praise upon the ‘extraordinary’ Anglo-American relationship and to announce that the US would name one of its newest and most powerful surface ships, a guided missile destroyer, the ‘Winston Churchill’ in honour of the man who did so much to fashion the alliance.³² Furthermore, summits almost invariably feature symbolic acts of special relations. These range from the exchange of carefully selected gifts invoking shared historical experience through to side-by-side imagery designed to emphasise the steadfastness of UK-US relations. Consider, for example, how in the prelude to the Iraq war one commentator wrote of a Blair-Bush meeting that: ‘The choreography of the Camp David war council, so reminiscent of the FDR-Churchill meetings on that very spot, seemed to echo the greatest moments of the Anglo-American Alliance.’⁴

The Obama-Cameron pronouncement of the ‘essential relationship’ was thus immediately counterposed by the popular and historically ingrained association of bilateral Anglo-American summits with the special relationship. This evident incongruity was then underscored by the May 2011 summit unfolding in a manner similar to past Anglo-American

summits in terms of choreography and an invocation by key actors of the Anglo-American past-present in the interest of ongoing/future collaboration.³³ The term ‘essential relationship’ was conspicuously absent from Obama’s lengthy address to the Houses of Parliament on 25 May 2011.³⁴ Conversely, the traditionally cultivated impression of good personal relations between Prime Minister and President was carefully evolved with regular use of first-name references and through Cameron and Obama grilling together at a Downing Street barbecue and teaming-up when playing table-tennis with school children. The media also noted that President Obama’s selection of gifts was a marked improvement upon his previous visit to Britain in 2009. For instance, the Queen received a collection of rare memorabilia and photographs in a handmade album that chronicled the visit of her parents – King George VI and Queen Elizabeth – to the US in 1939.³⁵

In addition, the Obamas were treated by the Queen and Prince Philip to a tour of Buckingham Palace. This included showing Obama letters and artefacts charting Britain’s loss of its American colonies, which in typical Anglo-American familial fashion he called ‘a temporary blip in the relationship’, and a special exhibition of US memorabilia that featured a photograph of HMS *Resolute*. It was from the bones of this ship that the Oval Office desk was carved – a gift given in 1880 by Queen Victoria to President Rutherford B. Hayes. Indeed, so desperate did one commentator become that she advised ‘Those keen to pinpoint exactly how an ‘essential relationship’ differs from a special one will be tracking Michelle Obama’s wardrobe choices closely. The President’s wife has proved herself to have a talent for projecting a style which underscores and illustrates the Obama political message, whilst also showcasing her own personality.’³⁶

In the presence of history

Anglo-American summits are the most regular and prominent explicit reminder of the special relationship. Policy actors rehearse the tropes of specialness and almost invariably British media especially are sparked into an intense, if fleeting, discussion of the health or otherwise of the special relationship. The British media, and the political classes, are likewise highly attentive to how the arrival of a new US President in Office might impact the special relationship. For example, writing in February 2009 as Obama settled into the White House, Richard LeBaron, the US deputy chief of mission in the UK, noted that ‘This period of

excessive UK speculation about the relationship is more paranoid than usual... This over-reading would often be humorous, if it were not so corrosive.’³⁷

However, the resilience of the special relationship owes to much more than this. Neither the term special relationship nor the specifics of functional cooperation that traditionally preoccupy historians and political scientists are frequent topics of popular discussion in the UK. The special relationship has purchase at mass level primarily as a simple identifier for much more complex processes of reciprocal cultural transfer that reaffirm sentiment of ‘fraternal association’. One font from which this sentiment is continually replenished is history, or more precisely the history held in collective memory as a result of processes of remembering and forgetting. Cultural memories are generated and maintained by ‘cultural formations (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communications (recitation, practice, observance)’.³⁸ In the context of Anglo-American relations, the UK and US are bound by cultural markers that are quantitatively and qualitatively more pronounced than those shared between most, if not all, major states.

It is almost impossible for Britons not to walk through or alongside reminders of the historical entwining of Britain and America. Physical monuments to this shared past litter the landscapes of the UK (and US); further afield lie numerous cemeteries and memorials to the Anglo-American fallen, who often fought and died alongside each other in joint national endeavour. In recent years the importance of these sites of commemoration to sustaining the special relationship has received greater recognition. It is not just that they provide shrines to an Anglo-American past that draw visitors and encourage homage by current generations to those past. Rather, it is that these physical monuments are often designed to tell stories of an Anglo-American past, with or without the aid of modern explicatory plaques. For instance, in Edwards’ analysis of one of the earliest American Second World War memorials - a stained-glass window established in the church of Great Cransley in 1944 – he foregrounds the great care taken to assimilate pictorially the wartime alliance into a long history of Anglo-American common purpose.³⁹ He also draws attention to Sulgrave Manor which, as the ancestral seat of the Washington family, was used to help appropriate President George Washington to the Anglo-American tale.⁴⁰

These physical shrines to an Anglo-American past are also lifted discursively into contemporary institutional communications as part of the ‘memory diplomacy’ of public diplomats and other international actors.⁴¹ For example, physical objects associated with

American independence are often used by American and British officials to highlight the long heritage of Anglo-American relations in a light-hearted way where differences are consistent with 'family spats'.⁴² Consider, for instance, the extract below from President Reagan's address to the British Parliament in June 1982.

My first opportunity to stand on British soil occurred almost a year and a half ago when your Prime Minister graciously hosted a diplomatic dinner at the British Embassy in Washington. Mrs. Thatcher said then that she hoped I was not distressed to find staring down at me from the grand staircase a portrait of His Royal Majesty King George III. She suggested it was best to let bygones be bygones, and in view of our two countries' remarkable friendship in succeeding years, she added that most Englishmen today would agree with Thomas Jefferson that 'a little rebellion now and then is a very good thing' [Laughter].⁴³

Here a portrait is used as a memorial to British rule of America, Jefferson is invoked as a symbol of American rebellion against it, and past conflict is juxtaposed with 'remarkable friendship in succeeding years' to emphasise the evolution of special UK-US relations.

Much the same occurs within what Bennett terms 'commemorative diplomacy',⁴⁴ whereby actors use anniversaries of notable events to develop instrumentalised narratives. Within an Anglo-American context this would include not only UK and US government agencies but also numerous organisations and societies dedicated to promoting Anglo-American relations, such as the Pilgrims Society, Fulbright and the British-American project. A recent study of the US bicentennial celebrations in 1976, for example, detailed the considerable care taken by the British to ensure that their participation sent the right, and lasting, messages about Anglo-American relations. As the British Bicentennial Liaison Committee noted in its first meeting, commemorations of the American Revolutionary War were to be used to 'show how this evolved into a joint victory for English-speaking people on both sides of the Atlantic.'⁴⁵

The two most prominent British contributions were physical objects designed to underscore entwined Anglo-American histories, shared values and common ideals. The first of these was the Bicentennial Bell - a replica of the Liberty Bell and bearing the inscription 'For the People of the United States of America from the People of Britain July 4, 1976 "LET FREEDOM RING."'"⁴⁶ Queen Elizabeth II emphasised when presenting it in Philadelphia the

shared values and reciprocal interchange that underpinned UK-US relations: 'It seems to me that Independence Day, the Fourth of July, should be celebrated as much in Britain as in America. Not in rejoicing in the separation of the American colonies from the British crown but in sincere gratitude to the Founding Fathers of the great Republic for having taught Britain a very valuable lesson.'⁴⁷

The second item was a loaned copy of the 1215 Magna Carta, which was displayed prominently in the Rotunda of the US Capitol Building. This was first suggested by John Warner, the director of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, because it related to 'the foundation of the United States as a democracy' and 'was the British document best known and most revered by Americans'.⁴⁸ The Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Carl Albert, subsequently called the arrival of the document the 'most significant part of our Bicentennial celebration'; between the opening ceremony and October 1976 over one million visitors saw the document.⁴⁹ Furthermore, at the opening ceremony the Lord Chancellor, Lord Elwyn-Jones, duly emphasised how the War of Independence turned into a joint victory: 'Peoples not familiar with our ways have thought it paradoxical for the British to be joining in the celebration of the Bicentenary of what was, after all, the loss of the American colonies. They overlook our traditions of compromise. We now regard the events of two centuries ago as a victory for the English-speaking world.'⁵⁰

Evidently the abundance of 'cultural formations' in the UK that invoke association with the US provides rich material for policy actors and organisations as they endeavour to shape collective memory. Moreover, while the strategic use of memory is widespread, it is particularly powerful in an Anglo-American context because of mass capacity to understand and associate with cultural reconstructions. As Ryan explains, constructions of the past for particular purposes 'work most effectively within cultures that can read the symbols, accept the resonance of the language, and share in the emotion.'⁵¹ A common language, cultural interpenetration, shared values and closely entwined pasts enable Britons (and Americans) to read much from the same script of history. And this script speaks very much to special rather than essential Anglo-American relations.

Transatlantic transmission

Though from the Second World War onwards British and American governments sought to reinforce the special relationship through shaping collective memory, most Anglo-American cultural interaction is independent of government. One source of British attachment to the special relationship, buoyed by modern globalisation, is that Anglo-American publics consume products of UK-US cultural interaction, high and low, daily through literature, education, television, film, social media, advertising, art and music. These media facilitate a transatlantic transmission belt of ideas, experiences, values, fashion and societal commentary that breed Anglo-American familiarity.

Little of this addresses the functional dynamics of Anglo-American relations as emphasised by the 'essential relationship'. Rather, it serves principally as a subconscious conditioner of public opinion toward Anglo-American affiliative sentiment and, sometimes, toward the nomenclature special relationship as a catchphrase able to encompass diverse and sometimes contradictory sources of sympathy for Anglo-American relations. Measuring the strength of this sentiment was an important aspect of US Information Agency work during the Cold War, as was the development of exchange schemes to foster greater UK awareness of the US. Scholars were slower to scrutinise the sense and sources of British popular affiliation with the US and how these impacted relations between Britain and the US. It took the so-called cultural turn in historical studies to focus attention on the relationship between national culture and state behaviour in international relations.

Consider in this light, therefore, Akira Iriye's the argument that 'Culture in the study of international relations may be defined as the sharing and transmitting of consciousness within and across national boundaries'.⁵² Cast this way British attitudes towards the US, and the underlying reasons for them, assume greater explanatory importance for the special relationship – and the failure of the 'essential relationship'. From a memory perspective, for instance, generational change progressively eliminates experiential memory of formative events in the special relationship, notably the zenith of UK-US cooperation in the Second World War. The prospect of maintaining the special relationship in collective memory is thus facilitated by the daily flow back and forth across the Atlantic of its discourse, symbolism, stereotypes, cultural references and associations. As the US Ambassador to the Court of St James, Anne Armstrong, put it in February 1976, the special relationship is 'like a tapestry - a thick one, a fine one', not just in governments but also 'in the world of ideas, of culture, of art, of business.'⁵³

There is a case to be made, too, that these public-level cultural interactions at the base of the Anglo-American coral reef have become more politically prominent since the Cold War. This is reflected most obviously in terms of Anglo-American affinity offering a source of legitimacy for UK-US action in lieu of anti-communist justifications. Equally, in the absence of ideological divisions culture plays an increasing international role with regards to identity formation. The best known post-9/11 claim to a UK-US centric ‘we’ grouping is a revival of Churchill’s fraternal association in the form of an Anglosphere.⁵⁴ Yet even more amorphous sentiments of UK-US affinity appear driven increasingly by cultural connections, especially in younger generations. A recent British Council survey of over 1,000 British and American people aged 18-34 found that history and culture, rather than politics, were the principal factors in shaping attitudes towards the UK and US.⁵⁵

Cultural discourses, then, shape identity and imagination, and those of Britons since the Second World War have developed alongside and through ideas of special UK-US relations. Moreover, these national discourses are entwined with those of the US – a good example of Iriye’s ‘sharing and transmitting of consciousness within and across national [read Anglo-American] boundaries’. Scholarly research has now begun to complement traditional geopolitical studies by identifying and examining the contribution of this reciprocal cultural transfer to the Great Rapprochement and to the origins of the special relationship. For instance, Vucetic highlights the significance of Anglo-Saxonism, Haglund explains shifting identities within the US through strategic culture, Cooper foregrounds familial connections and Dobson emphasises an Anglo-American evolutionary dialogue of liberal political doctrine such that it transcended national boundaries.⁵⁶

What is particularly significant nowadays, though, is that Anglo-American cultural sharing has intensified even as geopolitical drivers of functional cooperation have weakened since the Cold War. British and American creative industries are increasingly entwined.⁵⁷ Modern communication systems compress time and space such that Anglo-American peoples can develop a greater sense of proximity than ever before. They might even acquire a common heritage and shared memories with people they have no former connection to.⁵⁸ Not only does this reinforce Britons’ sense of affiliation with the US but it also helps British and American societies to develop broadly in-step as they respond to common challenges and shared opportunities. As Harry Allen once noted of the UK and US, ‘It is a problem throughout their history to determine whether common or analogous courses of actions in the

two countries are due to direct influence of the one upon the other, or to similar responses to similar stimuli. There are certainly many examples of both... But even to the casual glance there are broad parallels in the two histories which cannot possibly be ascribed merely to coincidence.’⁵⁹

Red Lines and contours

There are many things Britons dislike or envy about their American cousins. Yet British governments have nevertheless long been able to rely upon popular sympathy for Anglo-American cooperation and for the US, three features of which are particularly significant. The first is the consistent and unusually high levels of British popular affiliative sentiment for their American counterparts. For example, in November 2002 an Ipsos Mori poll showed that four in five British respondents (81%) agreed with the statement that ‘*I like Americans as people*’.⁶⁰ A Pew Centre report demonstrated similarly that across the years 2002-17 British favourable attitudes towards the US fluctuated between 50% and 75%.⁶¹ Second, British public opinion evidently distinguishes quite effectively between the general and the specific in its assessments of Anglo-American relations and the US. For example, British public opinion has been consistently questioning of President Trump. In November 2016 a survey by ComRes showed that 53% thought Trump would be a bad president and that 66 per cent agreed that as president he made the world a more dangerous place.⁶² In July 2018 two opinion polls reported more than two-thirds of Britons to have an unfavourable view of Trump (YouGov, 77%; Ipsos MORI Political Monitor, 68%)⁶³ and a further YouGov report based on data collected between May 2018 and March 2019 indicated a negative British popularity rating of Trump of 67%.⁶⁴ Yet despite this consistently critical evaluation of Trump, opinion polls still demonstrate that the British public sees the US overwhelmingly as Britain’s most important ally. A February 2017 Opinion poll showed that from a list of 13 options, 50% selected the US; Germany came second with just 9%.⁶⁵ Similarly *The Washington Post* cited a senior British official to the effect that detailed choreography of Trump’s visit to Britain in July 2018 was geared “‘not to make it about personal chemistry, it was to make it about national chemistry, and the national chemistry, it’s very, very good.’”⁶⁶

Third, British public opinion has demonstrated remarkable capacity to rebound from temporary, crisis-driven, losses of confidence in US leadership and actions. Probably the best

example of this is the 1956 Suez crisis, which is often seen as ‘a watershed for British influence, not only in the Middle East but throughout the world.’⁶⁷ Still recovering from the Iranian oil nationalisation crisis,⁶⁸ British leaders felt compelled to take a hard line when Egyptian President Nasser nationalised the strategically vital Suez Canal. A secret deal between Britain, France and Israel saw the latter initiate an attack on Egypt that in turn enabled France and the UK to enter the Suez Canal zone nominally in a peace-keeping function. To British dismay, the Eisenhower administration dismissed the intervention’s fig-leaf legitimacy and exploited Britain’s economic weakness to force the Eden government to accept a UN ceasefire.

Britain lost in November 1956 approximately US\$280m from its reserves and the US Treasury linked support for sterling to British withdrawal from Egypt. The consequent humiliation suffered at American rather than Egyptian hands impacted severely on British elite and public opinion. Britons who said they trusted the US a ‘great deal’ to side with Britain in international disputes plummeted to 25% in 1957 and some 130 Conservative MPs publicly censured the Eisenhower administration for gravely endangering the Atlantic Alliance. Yet in August 1959 such crowds flocked to see Eisenhower on a visit to London that Prime Minister Macmillan told the President repeatedly ‘I never would have believed it’.⁶⁹ By the summer of 1961 favourable British opinion had returned to pre-Suez levels, with 56% of Britons reporting a ‘great deal’ of trust in the United States.⁷⁰

For the most part, then, British public opinion has been favourably disposed toward the US to a degree unusual in international relations and resilient in the face of occasional aberrations. This has given British governments considerable latitude in their dealings with Washington and in the pursuit of joint endeavours. At the same time, consistently strong popular identification with the US and Americans has stunted development of British identities other than Atlanticism, the implications of which have been felt most strongly in Britain’s relationship with Europe. Critics have long maintained that the special relationship encouraged British delusions of grandeur and reluctance to accept a European vocation for Britain.⁷¹ The Churchillian mantra of being with but not of Europe has long been reflected in British government claims to Britain being a transatlantic bridge between the US and Europe.⁷² It was strongly echoed, too, in Prime Minister Johnson’s pledge in August 2019 that he would make Britain a ‘flying buttress for Europe’ – an architectural reference to an external support for a larger structure.⁷³ Indeed, the contrast between deep fissures within

Britain over Europe and the stability of popular identification with the US was starkly exposed by the referendum vote for Britain to leave the EU and the subsequent disastrous handling of Brexit by a profoundly divided British Parliament.

When cast against this backdrop, it is all the more revealing of how enduring popular affiliation for the US and Americans has contoured British foreign policy from the Second World War onwards. The ‘essential relationship’ was launched at a seemingly propitious moment. British popular opinion remained favourable towards the US and bitterness and recriminations over Iraq and the apparent lack of British influence on the Bush administration were fast receding. Yet the ‘essential relationship’ still failed. This suggests that British public opinion exercises something of a red line in terms of government representation and public performance of Anglo-American relations, the rationale for which is primarily sentimental.

Two examples suffice to make this point. First, consider popular identification with figures of history within Anglo-American relations, and none more so than Winston Churchill. President Obama incurred significant criticism when upon entering the White House he moved a bust of Churchill, loaned to President George W. Bush by Prime Minister Blair, from the Oval Office to outside the Treaty Room. Future British Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared that the removal of Churchill’s bust was seen by some as a sign of an ‘ancestral dislike of the British Empire’. *The Times* reported similarly that ‘Mr Obama shows little evidence of the Anglophilia that led his predecessors to pepper speeches with quotations from Churchill. Instead, there have been suggestions that he has reason to disdain the former Prime Minister.’⁷⁴ Conversely, there was much positive comment when Donald Trump restored Churchill’s bust to the Oval Office in January 2017. When news first broke of Trump’s intention, *The Sun* hailed it as ‘a diplomatic coup for the PM in her bid to win influence over the unpredictable new US leader.’ Elsewhere the move was generally interpreted as ‘a nod to the “special relationship”’; CNN was more effusive, calling it ‘the most notable move in an aesthetic redecoration of the space’.⁷⁵

The second example is the term special relationship itself. The British public does not prevent discursive reconstruction of the special relationship. This is demonstrated in the shift, for instance, from Churchill’s exclusive brand of special relationship to Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s concept of interdependence, which was developed in a context of relative British decline and the reconstruction of UK-US relations after Suez. Indeed, the

special relationship would likely wither without such reformulations. As Alex Danchev explains, one of its great strengths is its capacity to ‘invent and reinvent itself, to exploit its mythical potential – which may be as close as we get to its occult essence.’⁷⁶

This mythical dimension, of course, can be traced to Churchill’s selective reading of Anglo-American history and to his blend of interest and sentiment such that the special relationship was given natural justification and its contingency appeared eternal. Though the ‘special relationship’ was slow to gain traction,⁷⁷ once it did so it constituted a semiological system that was, and still is, popularly consumed as a factual system rather than as a system of values.⁷⁸ As such, Macmillan’s discursive reconstruction of Anglo-American relations through the concept of interdependence largely succeeded because it was done within the parameters of the special relationship. By contrast, Cameron and Obama failed because they sought to distinguish discursively Anglo-American relations *from* the special relationship, and in doing so they challenged a popularly received and historically embedded ‘truth’.

Conclusion

At one level the ‘essential relationship’ saga was farcical. It succeeded only in bringing forth the very media hypersensitivity and obsession with atmospherics of the special relationship that the ‘essential relationship’ was designed to correct. It was also of little significance to the conduct of Anglo-American relations. Yet, the episode is nevertheless important insofar as it is instructive of British attitudes towards the special relationship and how these can influence broadly the contours of British foreign policy and, especially, its presentation.

The contrast between the relative success of Macmillan’s concept of interdependence and the failure of the ‘essential relationship’ indicates that British public attitudes are sensitive less to aspects of Anglo-American functional cooperation than to a multiplicity of emotional and intellectual attachments captured in the nomenclature special relationship. From the perspective of British media and popular opinion, it really does matter whether someone calls relations between the UK and US the ‘special relationship’ or not. Policy actors, even over forty years since Prime Minister Heath’s failed ‘natural relationship’, evidently still need to respect this popular sensitivity in their discursive reconstructions of

Anglo-American relations - however logical or advantageous it might be to develop a discourse more reflective of current rather than post-1945 circumstances.

Furthermore, this situation appears unlikely to change significantly in the foreseeable future. Admittedly, the Trump presidency has caused considerable popular and elite upset in Anglo-American relations, ranging from the president's personal unpopularity amongst Britons and frequent remarks bearing upon British domestic politics through to diplomatic shock at episodes such as Sir Kim Darroch's resignation as British ambassador to Washington in July 2019. Nevertheless, scope to reconstruct Anglo-American relations discursively as being anything other than 'special' will likely remain limited. For a start, British public opinion has a long demonstrated capacity to distinguish sufficiently such that it identifies elements of the US or American policy that it finds distasteful whilst still maintaining high levels of general support for UK-US relations. Also, Britain's transatlantic link is likely to receive ever more elite and popular attention as Brexit proceeds and a potential alternative European identity for Britons recedes once more. Most important of all, though, the special relationship remains effectively preserved in the social practices and artefacts – objectivised culture⁷⁹ - of an Anglo-American 'community'. Intense Anglo-American cultural interpenetration coupled with the weight of history – instrumentalised and otherwise – thereby helps hold British popular opinion in modes of identification more attuned to the established and romanticised image of Anglo-Saxon equals than of the contemporary reality of acutely asymmetric power relations. 'Essential' consequently cannot suffice for, as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once famously established of the Anglo-American relationship, there is no debate to be had: 'It is special. It just is, and that's that.'⁸⁰

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