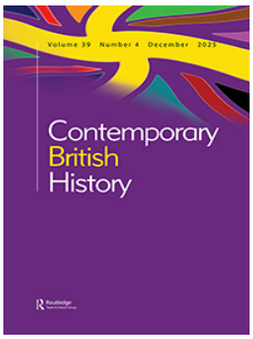

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Public faces of the Anglo-American special relationship

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ABSTRACT

The Anglo-American special relationship is in part at least a discursive construct. Its public face is co-produced by British and American officials through speech, sign and symbol with an intent to influence strategically international and domestic opinions. Much less scholarly attention has been paid to this than to Anglo-American functional cooperation. This article consequently examines how a metanarrative of continuity has been maintained since World War Two whilst Britain and the US have also subtly evolved the public face of the special relationship to suit their particular interests and to preserve its credibility. The analysis shows how Churchill crafted the original model of special relations, how Britain and the US have not always agreed on the public representation of the special relationship but nevertheless reconstructed it discursively, and how the narrative of special relations has acquired socio-cultural resilience.

KEYWORDS

Anglo-American; special relationship; Churchill; Myth; public diplomacy

In July 2024, after just 5 days as British Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer sat alongside US President Joe Biden in the White House. With a NATO summit scheduled concomitantly in Washington, this meeting marked an exception to traditional American reluctance to host bilateral talks during such major international summits lest any individual nation take offence. A planned 45-minute meeting between President and Prime Minister became an hour. The subsequent press conference saw Biden describes the UK as 'the knot tying the transatlantic alliance together' and Starmer affirm that 'the Special Relationship is so important. It is forged in difficult circumstances, endured for so long, and stronger now than ever'.[1] Even though this was not an official Anglo-American summit, Starmer also maintained a tradition of gift-giving designed to build personal rapport and/or emphasise the uniqueness of Anglo-American connections. Set against a backdrop of England's ongoing progress in the European Football Cup and his being a season ticket holder at Arsenal Football Club, Starmer gave Biden a personalised team shirt with his name and the number 46 on the back in reference to his being the 46th US president. He also gave him a copy of the 1941 Atlantic Charter featuring amendments from the then Labour leader Clement Attlee.[2]

Much has been written on the unusual depth and breadth of functional Anglo-American cooperation and whether Anglo-American relations constitute a special

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relationship.[3] Less, however, has been said about government presentation—the public face—of special relations, its consequences and how it may have changed over the years.[4] This is important. As Alex Danchev once argued, a key strength of the Anglo-American special relationship is a capacity to 'invent and reinvent itself, to exploit its mythical potential—which may be as close as we get to its occult essence'.[5] For all its independent underpinnings in history, culture, language, similar political and legal systems and functional cooperation driven by unusually high coincidences of strategic interest, the special relationship is, ultimately, an artificial construct. It was originally an empty nomenclature claimed by Winston Churchill for Anglo-American relations in an attempt to mark them as being of a higher order of importance than other international relationships—a vehicle for diplomatic advantage and tending British popular attachment to greatness amidst serious wartime setbacks and hardship. Over time, the nomenclature gained substance and recognition.

This article therefore examines how the idea of a special relationship has been presented by UK-US governments, potential consequences for Anglo-American relations of this presentation, and how the narrative of special relations has over time become socio-culturally resilient. To do so, it takes snapshots across time of the public construction of the special relationship. The first section examines Churchill's original invocation of the special relationship and how he helped establish it as a recognisable feature of both international relations and diplomatic lexicon. The second section reveals how in the 1950s and 1960s calculations of political advantage and disadvantage caused British and American governments to differ in their desired presentation of the special relationship. The next section examines how UK-US co-construction of the special relationship was adjusted in the 1970s to accommodate Britain's relative decline and the slow passage into history of the zenith of Anglo-American cooperation during World War Two (WW2). The final section suggests that the adjusted narrative of the 1970s largely continues into the present. This is because of ongoing advantages for British and American governments in maintaining this public face of Anglo-American relations and because the practice has been so successful that moving away from the established narrative of special relations has now become politically difficult.

The Churchillian relationship

The special relationship is more than a slogan locating Britain's place in the world. These come and go with little popular attachment or lasting media comment. Consider, for example, Prime Minister Blair's 'pivotal power' notion—and most likely Prime Minister May's post-Brexit 'Global Britain' concept. Suggest, though, that the US might be downgrading or disrespecting the special relationship and a media storm is almost guaranteed. Likewise, the Foreign Office noted as early as 1965 that 'With each change of President there is a tendency in Britain to feel that the basic relationship can never be the same'.[6] Given the commercial imperatives of the media, detailed coverage of these political transitions in the White House reflects both the perceived importance of the relationship and the assumed consumer interest in it. Moreover, unlike a political slogan, the special relationship is a long-term co-construction maintained by the two countries since shortly after WW2.

So how did a useful but conceptually empty nomenclature claimed for Anglo-American relations first by Winston Churchill become so internationally recognisable and such an integral part of the British socio-political landscape especially? Studies of the special relationship often trace its antecedents to the Great Rapprochement and beyond, emphasising two kindred societies locked since the Revolution in dialogue and a cross-fertilisation of ideas, values and principles. This translated into considerable lock-step evolution in these societies. Consider, for instance, dialogues around race and slavery, identity construction around Anglo-Saxonism, and struggle between conservative and liberal political traditions.[7] For some scholars at least, these developments established a type of path dependence towards Anglo-American cooperation.[8]

This is, as will become apparent, important. However, the articulation of an Anglo-American special relationship really began with Winston Churchill in his Sinews of Peace speech in Fulton Missouri in 1946. Here, he gave a label—the special relationship—to what had gone before in Anglo-American relations and, more especially, to what he aspired for them in the future. Of course, what constitutes a special relationship in international relations has been much debated for it 'is not a clear-cut, well defined concept'.[9] For the likes of Schoenbaum, a considerable array of international relationships might fall within its definition. He argues that the US has experienced special relationships with many countries 'as different in size, proximity, resources, and culture as Canada, Mexico, and Panama, Britain, France, and Germany, the Soviet Union and the Russia that reemerged from its ruins, at least one Korea, one Vietnam and two Chinas, Cuba, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador'.[10] Others, however, set the bar much higher. Frankel delimits special relations to those characterised by 'an association of exceptional intimacy, based upon close and continuous international cooperation'.[11] Reynolds reduces the candidate pool for special relationship status further by arguing that international significance constitutes an entry-level qualification. These diplomatic relationships must demonstrate the quality of a higher order than other bilateral alliances and be of special significance for both the two countries and the wider the international order.[12] Mumford is even more restrictive, contending that 'A truly "special" relationship must be defined as one that can ably demonstrate a *mutual level* of exceptional influence on each other's policy outlook and, crucially, this relationship should be discernibly monogamous, with no other country coming close to levels of influence, patronage and good will'.[13]

This array of definitions raises in turn questions of what is meant by quality? Functionalists might suggest that the answer lies in calculations of mutual utility in promoting national interests, meaning quality hinges on the degree of reciprocal usefulness within a relationship. The exploitative as well as cooperative dynamic implicit in this reading of a special relationship is reflected in the titles of some of the literature on Anglo-American relations—including Robert M. Hathaway's *Ambiguous Partnership* and Christopher Thorne's *Allies of a Kind*.[14] Likewise, Alex Danchev's 'terminalists' view the growing asymmetry in UK-US power positions as either marking or portending the end of special relations between the two countries.[15] However, it might then be asked how a special relationship is distinct from an alliance between major powers? For the likes of Lily Gardner Feldman, special relationships are deeper and more enduring than others because they involve both government and peoples. To qualify for special relationship status, states must cooperate closely to protect or promote common interests and

objectives in areas including culture, defence, diplomacy and economics. Concomitantly, the peoples of the two states must regard the other power as being essential for fulfilling some vital national interest and as possessing a mutual importance in historical perspective.[16]

Churchill would have cared nothing for these academic debates when he conjured the Anglo-American special relationship at Fulton. He was motivated primarily by a quest for diplomatic advantage, pressed by a combination of growing fear of Soviet intentions, Britain's wartime damage and a revision of British interwar policy towards the US from balancing its power to steering this into useful channels.[17] Nevertheless, the different understandings of what constitutes a special relationship help illuminate the particular representation of special relations to which Churchill aspired. In this context, the most important part of his Fulton speech was:

> I come to the crux of what I have travelled here to say. Neither the sure prevention of war, nor the continuous rise of world organization will be gained without what I have called the fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples. This means a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States. This is no time for generalities, and I will venture to be precise. Fraternal association requires not only the growing friendship and mutual understanding between our two vast but kindred systems of society, but the continuance of the intimate relationship between our military advisers, leading to common study of potential dangers, the similarity of weapons and manuals of instructions, and to the interchange of officers and cadets at technical colleges.[18]

Churchill's discursive framing of 'fraternal association' reveals much of his particular construction of special relations. As with most readings of special relationships, there was a strong functional dimension. Mutual utility calculated in common purpose was foregrounded, for instance, in a subsequent passage of the speech: 'If the population of the English-speaking Commonwealths be added to that of the United States with all that such co-operation implies in the air, on the sea, all over the globe and in science and in industry, and in moral force, there will be no quivering, precarious balance of power to offer its temptation to ambition or adventure. On the contrary, there will be an overwhelming assurance of security'.[19] However, Churchill also established a distinctive qualitative dimension to this functional cooperation. The key here is his emphasis on the continuation of intimate cooperation. Herein Churchill was invoking the unprecedentedly integrated Anglo-American wartime effort as a model for future cooperation. And while the Combined Boards were rapidly dismantled after the war, the legacies did endure of new patterns of collaborative behaviour, important personal relationships amongst leading officials, shared experiences and processes of learning. The extent, style and quality of subsequent functional cooperation in nuclear, military, intelligence and economic affairs, all underpinned by extensive and intimate diplomatic exchange, subsequently became a principal measure of difference between UK-US relations and other claimed special relationships.

However, Churchill's construction of fraternal association went much further than distinctive functional cooperation. It sought more solid foundations in what Coral Bell called the Anglo-American relationship's 'less readily mapped historical and intellectual bedrock'.[20] In line with Lily Gardner Feldman's understanding of special relationships, Churchill invested significant effort in his Fulton speech to establish the naturalness and enduring quality of kindred Anglo-American ideas, values and histories. Thus, for instance,

Churchill invoked how the American Declaration of Independence embodied rights and freedoms that ran through Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the Habeas Corpus, trial by jury, and the English common law.[21] Furthermore, he used these entwined Anglo-American histories, language, social institutions and cultures to liberate the special relationship of temporal bounds. For example, he concluded his speech with the statement that 'if all British moral and material forces and convictions are joined with your own in fraternal association, the high-roads of the future will be clear, not only for us but for all, not only for our time, but for a century to come'.[22]

In fact, through a very selective reading and representation of Anglo-American history, Churchill imbued his concept of a special relationship with a mythical quality. Anderson argues that 'All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias.[23] Churchill, selecting strategically from the 'potentiality of the [Anglo-American] archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon',[24] effectively recast the narrative of UK-US relations from historical enmity, or at least suspicion, to one that made special relations appear natural. Now, as Barthes explains, a myth is a system of communication and one of its core functions is to give a historical intention a natural justification and to make contingency appear eternal.[25] It is from this that Danchev's observation about the capacity of the Anglo-American special relationship to invent and reinvent itself flows. Moreover, because a semiological system is read not as a system of values but as a factual system, Churchill infused the special relationship with an additional source of longevity by removing it to some degree from the reality of power relations.

One further important feature of Churchill's framing of a special relationship was his representation of its being one of equals; Britain and the US being locked together in common responsibility and a shared destiny. In his Fulton speech, excepting an early face-enhancing observation that the US 'stands at this time at the pinnacle of world power',[26] Churchill did not speak of Anglo-American power asymmetry or even hint at a junior British role to an emergent hegemon. Rather, his employment of the term 'English-speaking peoples' implied a privileged and even exclusive bilateral relationship founded upon a partnership of equals. This was buttressed in his deployment of an 'imagined community' to advance his proposition that Britons and Americans would inevitably become ever closer: 'Eventually there may come—I feel eventually there will come—the principle of common citizenship, but that we may be content to leave to destiny, whose outstretched arm many of us can already clearly see'.[27] Churchill also conveyed subtly a sense of Anglo-American equality through his strategic use of social deixis. Specifically, he began with a 'you and I' association when referring to, respectively, his audience himself, subsequently transformed this into 'you and I/we' in terms of Americans (the you) and Churchill (the I) and Churchill + Americans (the we), and finally established a collective 'we' in the form of the British Commonwealth and the US.[28] Finally, Churchill denied a loss of Anglo-American equality both by explicitly presenting Britain's wartime losses as being but temporary and by attributing those losses to promoting joint Anglo-American cause:

> Let no man underrate the abiding power of the British Empire and Commonwealth. Because you see the 46 millions in our island harassed about their food supply, of which they only grow one half, even in war-time, or because we have difficulty in restarting our industries and

> export trade after six years of passionate war effort, do not suppose that we shall not come through these dark years of privation as we have come through the glorious years of agony, or that half a century from now, you will not see 70 or 80 millions of Britons spread about the world, united in defense of our traditions, our way of life, and of the world causes which you and we espouse.[29]

The Churchillian special relationship therefore sits at the more restrictive end of the definitional special relationship spectrum. It has Reynold's marker of international significance. It has Lily Gardner Feldman's twin relationships of states and peoples. And in its construction at least it comes close to Mumford's exacting monogamous relations within which lie mutual levels of exceptional influence on each other's policy outlook. But even more than this, Churchill imbued his concept of special relations with a mythical quality that provided subsequent grounds for reinvention because 'it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language'.[30]

The special relationship: attuning the volume

Over the years, the public face of the special relationship has brought Britain and the US significant benefits. For the US, it has helped combat American isolationist sentiment, offered its citizens comfort at moments of crisis, provided a source of legitimacy for particular government decisions/actions and helped counter charges of unilateralism. For Britain, it has also provided a source of legitimacy for certain decisions and actions. In addition, it has provided a means of combatting British overstretch, a source of entry both to Washington and to a claimed transatlantic bridging role, and a psychological crutch to tend a sense of greatness whilst the country declined to middle ranking power status. However, one source of contention in the public presentation of the special relationship concerns how loudly to trumpet it to foreign and domestic audiences. At different times and in different circumstances, the two countries have calculated differently the balance of advantage flowing from overt demonstrations of solidarity and privilege within their relationship. This can be illustrated by considering broad differences between the US and the UK in the 1950s and 1960s.

US Ambassador to London William Crowe once likened the special relationship to an iceberg.[31] This was an apt analogy insofar as it captured well the vast amount of everyday Anglo-American functional interaction that occurs without comment and, often, public knowledge. However, Washington and London have not always agreed on how much of this iceberg should be exposed. Consider the early days of the special relationship. As the British sought after WW2 to steer American power into useful channels, an approach famously captured in Prime Minister Macmillan's Greeks and Romans analogy,[32] this task included establishing an impression of privileged bilateral Anglo-American relations such that third parties were conditioned to expect that the US would support Britain in maintaining its overseas commitments. This, it was hoped, would help preserve British prestige, deter nationalist challenges to Britain's overseas interests and ease pressures arising from overstretch. However, the success of this policy depended significantly on constructing a special relationship that maintained a high profile and was seemingly privileged and exclusive.

Churchill led the charge, and, given his status and part American lineage, there was no better person to do so. The first challenge was to raise the international profile of Anglo-American relations. This was a driving calculation in his commitment to Anglo-American summits, knowing full well that bilateral meetings between Prime Minister and President would attract widespread media, third country and popular interest. They would also invoke very recent memory of his famous wartime summits with President Roosevelt.[33] Furthermore, regular bilateral UK-US summits would boost British prestige and, through careful choreography, provide an opportunity to rehearse repeatedly the unique Anglo-American wartime cooperation and long-standing ties of history, language, culture, and so forth.[34] Churchill's first summit meeting with Truman in January 1952, for instance, duly drew significant international media comment and consolidated a metonym between himself and the special relationship—highly favourable given Churchill's great popularity in the US. It also provided an opportunity for a prestigious address to a joint session of Congress, which British officials subsequently deemed 'very much of a personal triumph'.[35]

The second challenge was to make Anglo-American cooperation appear as extensive and exclusive as possible. Bilateralism and a semblance of two great powers concerting as equals was important. For instance, when dealing with Iran's nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's concession in the early 1950s, Churchill told President Truman 'I do not myself see why two good men asking only what is right and just should not gang up against a third who is doing wrong. In fact I thought and think that this is the way things ought to be done.[36] Similarly, he urged President Eisenhower to 'co-ordinate our policies on a basis of true partnership'[37] and pressed hard for exclusive Anglo-American arrangements, telling him that 'Two is company; three is hard company; four is a deadlock'.[38] Indeed, US Secretary of State Dean Acheson later recalled 'The British want to insist that there should be an exclusive U.S.-U.K. arrangement; that we do it together . . . They were continually trying at this time to go back to what was done in the war with the joint raw materials committee and the joint allocating force, and that sort of thing'.[39] Churchill, of course, had called precisely for this at Fulton in 1946.

However, while the US was prepared to engage in the discourse and performance of special relations, Churchill's preference for overt Anglo-American condominium was for American objectives embarrassing and counterproductive. For reasons of traditional anti-colonialism, political problems with Congress and a desire to harness developing world nationalism against communism, US administrations preferred not to be seen overtly supporting British imperial possessions. Likewise, overt and exclusive structures of Anglo-American cooperation complicated US efforts to develop important relationships with other countries. For the US at this time, the special relationship formed an indispensable part of its foreign policy, but it would only work optimally if it functioned as quietly and inoffensively as possible. As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles noted in 1953, there should be 'many intimate informal contacts to achieve indispensable harmony' but 'decisions should be through normal channels' and 'formal combination would adversely affect other allied relations'.[40] In fact, Eisenhower was so determined to avoid an impression of Anglo-American 'ganging up'[41] that in March 1953 he patronised British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden with an illustration of the difference between 'command' and 'leadership': 'Put a piece of cooked spaghetti on a platter. Take hold of one end and try to

push it in a straight line across the plate. You get only a snarled up and knotty looking thing that resembles nothing on earth. Take hold of the other end and gently lead the piece of spaghetti across the plate. Simple!'[42]

Interestingly, British and American positions reversed somewhat in the 1960s. By this time Britain's relative decline was undisguisable, decolonisation was proceeding apace, and London was realising it had been mistaken in not joining the European Economic Community (EEC) upon its inception in the 1957 Treaty of Rome. With traditional colonial trade routes weakening and the British sponsored rival to the EEC, the European Free Trade Association, failing to deliver anticipated benefits, the Macmillan government decided it needed to secure British entry to the EEC. The key problem in this was France, which under the leadership of President de Gaulle was resentful of American influence in Europe and desirous of generating greater impendence of the US to a point where the Community could operate as a third force between the superpowers. This meant that maintaining an impression of exclusivity and privilege in the special relationship might encourage a French veto on British membership of the EEC.

Macmillan's deal with President Kennedy over Polaris at the Anglo-American Nassau summit in December 1962 undoubtedly contributed to de Gaulle's veto in 1963 of Britain's first application to join the EEC. As the British prepared for a second application in 1967, Foreign Office records evidence changes in British thinking about the presentation of the special relationship. In October 1967, for instance, it was believed that overt US support for British membership would be 'embarrassing to us',[43] and in talking to Europeans British officials would 'tend to play down the concept that our relations with the U.S. are in any way different in nature from those which other European countries have'.[44] PHG Wright at the Foreign Office even recommended that 'it is to be hoped that from now on the phrase "special relationship" in any context can be avoided, even if only for the purposes of denying its existence'.[45] Indeed, following de Gaulle's second veto of British membership in 1967 and consequent preparation of a third British application early in the 1970s, Prime Minister Heath championed the term 'natural relationship' in lieu of the special relationship.

Meantime, in the US worries grew that, on the back of the sterling devaluation in 1967 and withdrawal from East of Suez, Heath's natural relationship and Britain's EEC membership bid signalled a downgrading of British Atlanticism and potential retreat into a 'grasping little Englandism and a not so splendid isolationism, which could be damaging for us as well as for them'.[46] Concomitantly, the Vietnam war isolated the US from most of its allies and contributed to breaking the American post-war bipartisan consensus. It also, in conjunction with costs of President Johnson's Great Society reforms, leadership of the western alliance and underpinning of the Bretton Woods system, highlighted American relative economic decline and fed US isolationist sentiment. Coupled with the subsequent Watergate scandal, an American sense of loneliness and need of allies grew significantly.

President Johnson was unsympathetic to Prime Minister Wilson's perceived use of Anglo-American summitry for domestic political gain, allegedly once telling an aide, 'We got enough pollution around here already without Harold coming over with his fly open and his pecker hanging out, peeing all over me'.[47] Still, though, he, Nixon and Ford all embraced the special relationship and opportunities to rehearse its tropes publicly as both its symbolic and practical importance to America increased. For example, the Johnson administration was deeply concerned about the foreign and domestic impact

of British defence cuts envisaged in the Healey Defence Review. In May 1967 Secretary of State Dean Rusk urged that President Johnson in a forthcoming meeting to warn Wilson that 'Congress and American people will not permit us to stand alone' and that 'we must have reliable allies'.[48] The latter was no more the case than in Vietnam, where National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy mused that a British Brigade 'would be worth a billion dollars at the moment of truth for sterling'.[49] President Nixon was similarly keen, for foreign relations and domestic opinion purposes, to preserve the public imagery of Anglo-American steadfastness, pushing repeatedly for a summit meeting with Harold Wilson following Heath's resignation in 1974.[50] Furthermore, as President Ford sought to rebuild American leadership credibility and the Vietnam syndrome bit, the State Department speculated in 1974 that 'it seems prudent to assume that at some time in the next 5–10 years we may want to have a British flag alongside our own for both political and military reasons'.[51] Therefore, overt demonstrations of Anglo-American solidarity generally suited the US better than Britain in the 1960s and early1970s, something further reflected in Nixon's continuing use of the term special relationship despite Heath's announced preference for the natural relationship.

Transitioning the public face of special relations

In 1968, a State Department Intelligence analysis rightly noted that 'The special relationship has been pronounced dead as often as Martin Bormann has been reported alive'.[52] This owed primarily to continued reciprocal, if asymmetric need, and widespread and institutionalised patterns of functional cooperation. However, it also owed to a capacity for public reinvention afforded by Churchill's original invocation of a special Anglo-American relationship. Specifically, by wrapping functional cooperation in a mythology of a natural Anglo-American friendship destined to promote and defend a shared way of life, Churchill enabled British and American governments to engage continually in interdependent processes of recalculating benefits and limitations of cooperation and to adapt the public face of relations accordingly. This ongoing co-construction became vital because it generally enabled myth and reality to be maintained in sufficient congruence that a semiological system has been consumed as a factual one.[53]

On occasion, however, the congruence between myth and reality has been so stretched that significant changes in the public construction of the special relationship have been necessary to preserve a sense of credibility. Given the many predictions that the end of the Cold War would finally bury the special relationship, it might be expected that the most important and challenging discursive reconstruction would occur in the early 1990s.[54] Yet this is not the case. By far more significant is how British and American officials evolved the narrative of special relations in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The British soon appreciated after WW2 implications arising from Britain's relative decline and the growing asymmetry in UK-US relations. Even beneath the early Churchillian representation of the special relationship lay recognition that Britain's demotion from 'Protagonist to attendant Lord'[55] required British exploitation of consanguinity rather than the exercise power to guide US policies, even if that meant political sacrifices. For instance, in April 1950 it was recommended that Britain establish a position 'closely related to the U.S.A., and yet sufficiently independent of her, to be able to influence American policy in the directions desired'.[56] Over time, it also became recognised that, as

the British Embassy in Washington and Policy Planning Staff explained in 1969, the price of influence over 'the conduct of the United States in affairs which concern us' would likely increase as Britain became less indispensable to the pursuit of American aims.[57] Furthermore, ties of culture and affiliative sentiment might occasionally tip the balance in Britain's favour where US interests were not at stake but American willingness to indulge the special relationship depended fundamentally on Britain continuing to offer valued functional and diplomatic advantages. Absent these then, as British Ambassador to the US, Sir Oliver Wright, warned in 1983, 'farewell the tranquil mind and farewell the special relationship'.[58]

What happened was twofold. First, Anglo-American positive calculation of mutual utility changed rather than ended. At the onset of the Cold War, the Americans needed quantitative and qualitative British contributions to 'free world' defence, especially hard power resources given the development of NATO, the Warsaw Pact, proven Soviet atomic capability, and the globalisation and militarisation of containment strategy in National Security Council Resolution 68. Britain's global presence, diplomatic experience, influence, technological contributions, military and intelligence capabilities, and so forth were at that point indispensable. The Middle East, for instance, was initially designated a British responsibility. However, this changed over time. Technological developments reduced the relative need of far-flung British bases, American power expanded to fill vacuums left by declining imperial powers—Britain included—and Mutually Assured Destruction reduced the relative utility of hard power. This, coupled with the consequences of decolonisation and the increasingly complex interdependence revealed by the 1970s' energy and economic crises, moved the emphasis in American need towards soft power, legitimising functions and niche contributions—something that played to Britain's remaining strengths.[59] Meantime, no power other than Britain emerged as a potential American ally that was as capable, reliable and consistently aligned with US strategic interests. Even at the peak of British disarray in the 1970s, US officials lamented 'the parochial view of the world held by many of our Allies' and concluded that 'we see the UK as the only European power which is capable of viewing world developments consistently from a broad perspective'.[60]

That Britain remained useful, if no longer indispensable, to the US helped preserve a degree of credibility in the narrative of special relations. Concomitantly, however, this sense of credibility was aided by adjustments in the official narrative of special relations made to reflect recalculations of mutual utility, Britain's relative decline and the passage of time from the original invocation of the special relationship. As early as the 1960s, British officials were rethinking the Churchillian special relationship. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously spoke of Anglo-American interdependence and privately some officials at least had come to think that 'The term "special relationship" is rather old hat'.[61] This conclusion was informed in part by sensitivity about Britain's applications to join the EEC. More especially, though, it reflected the now inescapable reality of Britain's demotion from the top table of international powers. In October 1967, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office pinpointed the problem thus: 'The phrase "special relationship" grew up in the years following the wartime partnership as a term of art to describe an Anglo-American partnership which was regarded as the keystone of our foreign policy. It rested on a certain surviving but diminishing "equality" with

the United States, and on certain special forms of co-operation in defence and atomic fields not shared by the Americans with other countries … .Now that Britain is adjusting herself to a new status in the world, there is no claim to equality of resources or power with the U.S. and it is our policy to operate in an increasingly European framework … '[62]

The Churchillian narrative of special relations could not survive the increasingly evident gap between mythology and practice. It had been hollowed out. British Ambassador to the US, Sir Patrick Dean, spoke directly to this in October 1967: 'Where we have had difficulty is over the fact that we, hitherto at least, have been concerned publicly to play up our relationship with the United States as far as possible as if it were 'special' and exclusive …'[63] What was needed was a reinvention of the special relationship, one that maintained its unique roots but adapted to the times. Slowly the special relationship was steered discursively away from exclusivity and susceptibility to impressions of attachment to a crumbling Anglo-American condominium. In its stead was substituted for public consumption a democratised special relationship that located itself increasing in multilateral contexts. In 1971, for example, Wilson argued that the future health of the special relationship in an interdependent world was contingent upon 'a wider association'.[64] Four years later, President Ford, in a toast to Wilson during the latter's visit to the White House, declared that 'The problems underlying our interdependence of nations and the need for communication are vastly important, and our two nations, I think, can set an example for the problems that we face in this regard'.[65]

In this way, public representation of the special relationship progressively shifted towards its being a non-exclusive relationship operating in support of global good. Anglo-American relations were no longer the special relationship. Rather, they were the most special of special relationships, reflecting Britain's reduced status and the US tendency especially to use the term special relationship ever more liberally. This is important, not only for preserving a credible narrative of special relations in the 1970s but also for helping the public special relationship survive into the post-Cold War era. A common enemy may have faded away with the collapse of the USSR, but Anglo-American relations could still help underpin a liberal multilateral order and defend a shared way of life. Note, for example, how in 1995 President Clinton foregrounded the uniqueness of the Anglo-American relationship born of historic connection and experience but placed it in a contemporary multilateral context: 'Other times in other places are littered with the vows of friendship sworn during battle and then abandoned in peacetime. This one stands alone, unbroken, above all the rest, a model for the ties that should bind all democracies.[66] President Obama did something similar before the British House of Commons in 2011, stressing also the changing nature of the special relationship: 'the days are gone when Roosevelt and Churchill could sit in a room and solve the world's problems over a glass of brandy … .In this century, our joint leadership will require building new partnerships, adapting to new circumstances, and remaking ourselves to meet the demands of a new era.'[67] Past, present and future Anglo-American relations thereby remained carefully woven together within a narrative of unbreakable friendship and common purpose but, while Churchill remained within this as a key figure of history, his vision of the public form of the special relationship had been quietly discarded.

The resilient public special relationship

To this point it has been argued that careful Anglo-American co-construction of the public special relationship has helped maintain its visibility, credibility and utility. However, over time progressively more has come into play in preserving this public narrative of special relations. Specifically, so successful has routine official rehearsal of the tropes of specialness been, that the concept and general form of a special relationship have become socio-culturally embedded, especially in British society. The special relationship is now recognised and uncritically used shorthand for the myriad connections between Britain and the US. It is the source of much media commentary, inspiration for the literature and film, and an integral part of the wider Anglo-American cultural connection that governments have ever less control over.[68]

To illustrate this, and its importance to Anglo-American co-construction of the special relationship, we can return to the idea of potential cost arising from the relationship's public presentation. In the 1950s and 1960s both Britain and the US were periodically concerned about downside risks flowing from an overly overt special relationship. Nowadays, the US has largely nullified concerns about Anglo-American exclusivity and privilege by using the term special relationship indiscriminately with a host of other countries. Presidents from Truman to Obama invoked 'special relationships' with 22 countries other than the UK; President Trump even used the phrase in reference to Kim Jong Un and North Korea.[69] For the British, however, matters are more difficult. It remains generally advantageous to be seen to have especially close relations with US administrations, but there are inherent dangers. The Trump administrations, for example, have been particularly unpredictable and while British Prime Ministers have consistently sought to maintain a tradition of Anglo-American summit meetings and close personal relations, these have not always delivered success or drawn positive comment. Still, more importantly, the asymmetry in the contemporary power positions of the US and UK accentuates media sensitivity to the atmospherics of UK-US relations and the risks to British governments arising from exposure of the tension between the myth and practice of special relations. Prime Minister Johnson's concern that the term special relationship risked making Britain seem needy or weak highlighted the difficult line that British officials walk between being perceived as a close ally and a supplicant power.[70]

A revealing example of this difficult line, and of how the public narrative of special relations has become socio-culturally resilient, stems from Prime Minister Blair's apparent lack of influence over US policy in the aftermath of 9/11 despite his staunch and expensive support for the Bush administration. This incurred him deep criticism and provoked caricatures of his being Bush's 'lap dog'. A British poll in 2002 recorded 46% of the respondents as thinking Blair was Bush's lapdog[71] and this analogy spread into popular culture, George Michael's 'Shoot the Dog' video, for instance, excoriating the Prime Minister's alleged suppliance.[72] In July 2010, a YouGov poll revealed that 84% of the respondents thought the UK had little or no influence on US policies and that 66% believed the US failed to consider British interests.[73]

This Blair poodle mythology popularised a long lineage of narratives, born of anti-Americanism and the asymmetry in Anglo-American relations, claiming—and resenting—British subservience to the US.[74] Significantly for this article, it also drove a potential agenda for change in the public construction of the special relationship. Fear of 'doing

a Tony'[75] encouraged efforts to reshape it as being more transactional and less sentimental. During the 2010 General Election, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties called for a more candid relationship[76] and cautioned against subservience to the US.[77] More unusual still, the nomenclature special relationship was explicitly attacked. In July 2009, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (HCFAC) announced an inquiry into 'the relationship between the UK and the US, and the implications this has on foreign policy'. The following year, coincidentally the 70th anniversary year of the Destroyers for Bases deal that marked the onset of the wartime Anglo-American special relationship, the Committee released a report entitled 'Global Security: US-UK relations'. Its most controversial recommendation was to avoid the use of the phrase 'special relationship'. In the Committee's view the term had become 'potentially misleading' and its 'overuse' by politicians and media served 'simultaneously to de-value its meaning and to raise unrealistic expectations about the benefits the relationship can deliver to the UK'.[78]

It is in this context that Prime Minister David Cameron attempted a public reformulation of Anglo-American relations that promoted close functional cooperation but de-sentimentalised those relations. In an interview with *Time* magazine in July, he acknowledged the asymmetry in UK-US relations and struck a pragmatic and hard-headed tone: 'I think that we should deal with things as they are rather than trying to be too needy'. Similarly, in the *Wall Street Journal*, his self-profession that 'I am not some idealistic dreamer about the special relationship' signalled a retreat from sentimental attachment, as did his criticism of obsessive analysis of the 'atmospherics around the relationship' and the 'seemingly endless British preoccupation with the health of the special relationship'.[79] Cameron, in conjunction with Obama, even floated an alternative to the special relationship—the 'essential relationship'. 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.[80]

The political signalling and motivations for it of Cameron, Obama and the HCFAC need little explanation. There was a perceived need to re-set Anglo-American relations and cauterise the Blair-Bush years. More important is the misconstruction of what was being attempted and the feasibility of it. Writing in *The Guardian* Patrick Wintour argued that Cameron's *Wall Street Journal* article was 'designed to frame a more mature alliance in which Britain recognises it can no longer rely solely on a 60-year-old version of the relationship'.[81] This was simply wrong. The Churchillian public face—and private operation—of the special relationship did not survive the 1960s. Similarly, the HCFAC noted that 'there is nothing wrong in acknowledging the undoubted truth that the UK has a special relationship with the US, as long as it is recognised that other countries do so also . . . '[82] Again, this seemed to ignore—or be unaware—that British officials had long ago moved to a position of seeking the most special of America's special relationships

rather than an exclusive special relationship that was neither credible nor, sometimes, desirable. For instance, it was recommended explicitly in August 1965 that 'we should make it clear that we in no way resent but, on the contrary, wish to encourage the Americans to establish close relations themselves with other European countries, including Germany'.[83]

These statements indicate an erroneous reading of the special relationship as a static, rather than evolving, concept. Importantly too, however, this misreading is a product of design insofar as the special relationship is often publicly constructed to create an impression of a timeless rather than changing relationship. Its core facets remain constant—a closely interwoven historical and cultural fabric, shared values and similar institutions, and a joint obligation to defend a shared way of life. These features are rehearsed publicly time and again in Anglo-American signs, symbols and discourse. For example, in 1946 Churchill urged 'we must never cease to proclaim in fearless tones the great principles of freedom and the rights of man, which are the joint inheritance of the English-speaking world'. In 1995, President Clinton very similarly declared of Britain and America that 'we still bear a burden of special responsibility' and that 'it falls to us to advance the cause [democracy] that so many fought and sacrificed and died for'.[84] And in 2023 Prime Minister Sunak affirmed that 'The values we share, our belief in freedom, democracy, and the rule of law have never changed. They never will … standing here together, as our predecessors have done for generations, I feel confident that through the strength of our relationship, we can shape the world once again in our pursuit of liberty, prosperity, and the possibilities of a new age'.[85]

Cameron's dismissal of the form and atmospherics of the special relationship ran directly into this metanarrative of continuity because the special relationship's survival depends upon public rehearsal of the tropes of specialness and the receptiveness of media and public opinion to it. Exploitation of media events such as Anglo-American summits, state visits and commemorative events are vital to the visibility of the special relationship. Consider, for instance, how much care the Starmer government invested when promoting the uniqueness of President Trump's second state visit in September 2025.[86] Similarly, the personalisation of politics has inevitably drawn focus upon personal relationships, especially those between Presidents and Prime Ministers.[87] For example, media drew powerful parallels between meetings held by Blair and Bush at Camp David ahead of intervention in Iraq and the famous wartime summits between Churchill and FDR. Likewise, political leaders recognise the importance of personal relationships for the conduct of business and the benefits of these being interpreted positively in the media. For example, pictures of President Reagan and Queen Elisabeth II riding together in June 1982 whilst at Windsor Castle enhanced the feel-good factor of the early Reagan-Thatcher years. In fact, Cameron himself indulged in similar courting of the media with Obama, playing table tennis and sharing barbequing duties.[88]

Even more importantly, the narrative of continuity connects the Anglo-American past with the present, offering a sense of reassurance and legitimacy, as well as helping overcome a potential weakening of bonds caused by passage of WW2 cooperation into received memory.[89] Hence, old narratives of WW2 solidarity and sacrifice are complemented by similar tales drawn not from Normandy or the battle for the Atlantic but from Helmand, Basra and Ukraine. Consider, for instance, comments by Sunak and Biden when meeting at the White House in June 2023. At the Press

conference, Biden noted that 'Earlier this week, we marked the 79th anniversary of D-Day, and — a timely reminder of the proud history of — our nations share and the values — the values that we have long stood together to defend. That's the unshakable foundation of this special relationship. And it is a special relationship.' In this way Biden affirmed the special relationship, invoked past sacrifice in common cause and stressed the timeless foundation of the relationship. He then proceeded to position the special relationship as forward-facing: 'Today, as NATO Allies, partners in innovation, as friends in a shared vision of the future, and the two nations—our two nations are ready to meet the challenges of our time and meet them together'.[90] For his part, Sunak took advantage of sitting in the Oval Office ahead of his bilateral meeting with Biden to invoke the post-WW2 lineage of President-Prime Minister relationships and Anglo-American solidarity in shared cause: 'it's daunting to think of the conversations that our predecessors had in this room when they had to speak of wars that they fought together, peace won together, and incredible change in the lives of our citizens'. Sunak then moved straight on to the present: 'And again, for the first time in over half a century, we face a war on the European continent. And as we've done before, the U.S. and the UK have stood together to support Ukraine and stand up for the values of democracy and freedom and make sure that they prevail, as I know we will'.[91]

Cameron's essential relationship predictably failed to gain traction and quickly disappeared—much the same as Heath's natural relationship had 40 years previously. The HCFAC report fed anti-American sentiment and unleashed some of the accumulated national angst about Afghanistan, Iraq and the perceived lack of British influence in Washington.[92] Nevertheless, the Committee's recommendation about the special relationship was ignored, politicians and media quickly returning to its indiscriminate as shorthand for the myriad Anglo-American connections. Tellingly, this reversion included Cameron and Obama.

All of this suggests that the public face of the special relationship, having renounced early claims to a semblance of equality and been adjusted to being non-exclusive, is unlikely to change as significantly again in the foreseeable future. The special relationship is a dominant narrative in the UK especially that has established a type of path dependency and demonstrated capacity to evolve—as all myths must if they are to survive. In this sense Hendershot is right insofar as Anglo-American officials may recognise 'the roles of myth and culture in the operational dynamic of the modern relationship . . . [but] they remain nevertheless ensnared by the mythology'.[93] However, with occasional context-driven exceptions, it is rare that they even attempt to escape. This is because the balance of advantage in preserving a public facing special relationship remains broadly positive. The US now maintains a number of special relationships, meaning indulging the tropes of specialness with Britain costs little and delivers politically useful contextual framing for functional cooperation and a potential source of legitimacy and of reassurance for American opinion. Conversely, a refusal to maintain the Anglo-American special relationship would be a severe blow to British prestige and foreign policy and potentially weaken both a key ally and affiliative sentiment between the two countries. From Britain's perspective, especially after Brexit, the special relationship is more indispensable than ever for functional reasons, the credibility of Global Britain and a sense of ontological security.[94]

Conclusion

The special relationship is not a British diplomatic construct. It may have originated with Churchill and been designed to promote British interests, but its existence owes to Anglo-American co-construction through discourse and strategic use of, for instance, remembrance, commemoration, cultural markers and landscapes. Without American reciprocity, the special relationship would have become a quickly forgotten political slogan. As it is, Churchill's blend of functional cooperation, sentimental affiliation and mythologisation imbued the public special relationship with a capacity to reinvent itself and, to some degree, loosen direct correlation with reality.

How the special relationship is presented matters and Britain and America have not always agreed on its public face. Contextual factors have shaped whether a strongly overt or lower profile special relationship best suits national interests at any given time—and, as happened in the 1950s and 1960s, sometimes there has been tension. On occasion, too, the tone can change, such as when Obama and Cameron sought distance from the Blair-Bush special relationship. Nevertheless, it is extremely rare that either side questions its ongoing construction because both generally perceive practical and psychological benefits from a publicly maintained special relationship. Moreover, stepping away from an established narrative of special relations has become difficult. For the UK, it remains indispensable to foreign policy and has become socio-culturally embedded as a source of ontological security. For the US, there are advantages in the tropes of specialness too but, more especially, serious risk of weakening an important ally were it to step away from a public-facing Anglo-American special relationship.

The public face of the special relationship has therefore been carefully tended and choreographed over the years. The major representational changes came in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when initial British pretences to a semblance of equality, privilege and exclusivity within the special relationship were finally dropped. Instead, to narrow the gap that evolved between myth and reality within the initial Churchillian concept, Anglo-American relations were reconstructed around an idea of their being the most special of US special relationships and prospering more often within 'wider association' and as a model of cooperation. Indeed, it is a construction that continues through to the present, US Secretary of State Blinken, for example, describing the UK in 2024 as a partner 'of first resort'.[95] Most of the time, though, shifts in the public presentation of the special relationship are subtle. They are also often obscured by the metanarrative of timelessness in special relations. This means that while the publicly rehearsed challenges and enemies against which Britain and America have a self-appointed special responsibility to defend a shared way of life may change, as they did upon the end of the Cold War and again after 9/11, the song of the special relationship remains essentially the same.

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