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Courting Trump: Anglo-American Relations and the House of Windsor

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that British handling of the Trump administrations has evidenced the under-recognised value of Britain's monarchy in promoting the Anglo-American special relationship. Traditional British approaches of seeking close leadership relations and public American endorsement of special relations have delivered mixed results and carried abnormally high political risks. The House of Windsor has consequently been enlisted to the cause with unusual intensity. This owes to three key reasons. First, Trump's ego and admiration for the monarchy enhance the latter's ability to provide an additional means of building diplomatic bridges and promoting a public narrative of special Anglo-American relations with the President and his administrations. Second, British royalty help reinforce Anglo-American cultural connection, popular American fascination with the House of Windsor enabling it to emphasise traditionally shared values to, and raise Britain's profile with, domestic US audiences. Finally, British royalty complements assiduous government cultivating of Trump and his administrations but also lessens political risk in close government association with a President deeply unpopular in large swathes of Britain.

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The Anglo-American special relationship has two principal components. The first is the extensive and institutionalised functional cooperation that developed from the Second World War onwards.¹ The second is an accompanying public narrative of special relations. This narrative draws upon the strong cultural bonds that exist between the UK and US and is strategically co-constructed through discourse, symbol, commemoration, memory and so forth.² On both counts, the Trump administrations have been arguably the most consistently difficult for British governments to deal with since the Second World War.³

Trump's first term was characterised by aggressive demands for rebalancing NATO and wider attacks on the norms, rules and institutions of the liberal international order. This shook the transatlantic alliance badly just as the UK left the European Union in pursuit of Prime Minister May's 'Global Britain'. Trump's second term began with the imposition of sweeping tariffs world-wide in an effort to renegotiate the terms of America's trade and investment relations. Britain was again caught in the melee and Downing Street scrambled to secure not so much a preferential trade deal as one with terms less damaging than those suffered by others. In addition, traditional avenues of Anglo-American communication have been strained. Not since Richard Nixon's 'imperial presidency' has a President placed such a high premium on personal loyalty and sought to so concentrate power in the White House.⁴

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All of this has caused a grinding of the foundation stones of the functional special relationship. Concomitantly, it has proven unusually difficult for the British to calibrate with the Trump administrations the optics of Anglo-American relations. These administrations' often provocative and inconsistent public diplomacy elevate diplomatic risks in closely associating Britain with the US, as does Trump's personal unpopularity in large sections of British society. Furthermore, keeping Trump on message has been hugely challenging given his erraticism, loose observance of diplomatic protocol, and proclivity for diplomacy by social media.⁵ Indeed, in 2019 Trump declared the British Ambassador in Washington, Sir Kim Darroch, persona non grata after memos leaked in which the latter reported the White House to be 'uniquely dysfunctional' and led by a man who 'radiated insecurity' and needed points made to him in 'simple' or 'blunt' terms.⁶

This article explores how British governments have consequently enlisted Britain's royal family as an additional means of building diplomatic bridges and promoting a public narrative of special Anglo-American relations with the Trump administrations whilst also softening political risks for themselves. The first section outlines why a third-party promotion of special relations with the Trump administrations offers particular advantages to British governments. The second section establishes how British royalty became an under-appreciated source of soft power that British governments began to tap increasingly after the Second World War. The third section examines the choreography, conduct and outcomes of Trump's meetings with British monarchs. The final section analyses how British royalty also helps cushion temporary negative political fallout within Anglo-American relations, arguing that its reinforcement of transatlantic cultural bonds encourages conditions for, if necessary, a potential renewal of the special relationship once Trump's second term concludes.

A problem of optics

Winston Churchill first appropriated the nomenclature special relationship for Anglo-American relations, most notably in his 'Iron Curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri, in 1946.⁷ Whether Anglo-American relations were ever, or are, special, has since been much contested, as has whether the concept of special relations gave Britain diplomatic advantage, provided a source of ontological security, or created a path dependency curtailing a European home in favour of Atlanticism.⁸ For the purposes of this article, though, what is important is that Churchill used the special relationship as a discourse marker to elevate Anglo-American relations above those of standard international relationships and as a means of justification for especially close relations between the two leading Anglo-Saxon powers.⁹ His justification rested not just on calculation of mutual utility in functional cooperation but also on a claimed naturalness of especially close British relations with the US that no other major power could rival.

History does not necessarily vindicate Churchill's claim of natural cooperation; the American republic was born in opposition to Britain and its empire and subsequently spent far more time in dispute than alliance with the 'motherland'. Nevertheless, in advocating 'the fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples', Churchill tapped at Fulton the so-called 'historical and intellectual bedrock'¹⁰ of Anglo-American relations to help discursively shift consciousness and wrap strategic objectives within a cloak of seemingly natural and timeless special relations. By selecting carefully what to foreground and what to forget from the 'accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct' that comprise the totality of Anglo-American relations,¹¹ he effectively imbued the special relationship with a mythical quality and consequent capacity to invent and reinvent itself – which Alex Danchev once suggested was possibly as close as one might come to its 'occult essence'.¹²

But this raises two crucial points. First, neither Churchill nor British governments could alone establish, develop and consolidate a public narrative of special Anglo-American relations. To become rooted in diplomatic lexicon and public consciousness, this narrative had to be accepted and reciprocated by American officials and peoples. In other words, the narrative had to be

co-constructed, a process that only really began once the Truman administration embraced containment strategy and therein returned Britain to its wartime status as America's most important ally.¹³ Second, mythical language depends upon human animation for survival.¹⁴ This means that the public narrative of special Anglo-American relations needs to be continually refreshed to maintain its relevance, credibility and utility. Over time British and American officials have done this routinely because both sides have perceived continued advantage in doing so.

The modern public narrative of special relations was largely negotiated in the 1970s. By this point Churchill's invocation of a privileged and exclusive special relationship, if not Anglo-American condominium, had been overtaken by Britain's relative decline and the rise of multilateralism. For instance, British Ambassador to the US, Sir Patrick Dean, argued in October 1967 that difficulties had arisen from '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...'¹⁵ British and US officials therefore discursively reconstructed the special relationship. For exclusive relations was substituted the notion of Britain enjoying the most special of America's special relationships. In lieu of Anglo-American command capabilities, renewed purpose was injected by casting the special relationship as a force for good operating within what in 1971 former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson termed 'a wider association'.¹⁶ Meantime an overarching narrative of continuity was maintained. First, the naturalness of 'fraternal association' continued to be rehearsed publicly through discourse, sign and symbol. Second, at Fulton Churchill had been careful to tie Anglo-American cooperation to the protection of a shared way of life rather than combatting the Soviet threat per se. This played well in the era of détente and economic crises of the 1970s but also reinforced the timelessness of special relations and joint mission therein. Hence when the USSR passed into history, the special relationship did not, contrary to prediction, lose its rationale.¹⁷ Rather, it retained compelling purpose in underpinning a liberal multilateral order and finding new monsters to slay in defence of a shared way of life.

Animating this public narrative requires complementary, ideally coordinated, Anglo-American manipulation of the discourse, signs and symbols of the special relationship such that relations past, present and future are woven within a natural continuum. Attention to optics is particularly important given sensitivity in Britain especially to the asymmetric nature of Anglo-American relations and what in May 2011 President Obama called an 'especially active press corps'¹⁸ keen to discern any indication of US slight upon the special relationship. This makes highly significant the choreography of President-Prime Minister summit meetings, personal leadership relations, invited leader addresses to Parliament and Congress, commemorative occasions, and so forth. And traditionally UK and US officials have been live to the opportunities and potential pitfalls of such occasions. For example, summit meetings are normally announced in prose stereotypical of the special relationship, gifts are selected to speak to the long history of Anglo-American association and/or continuing common purpose, and the public remarks of the two leaders frequently connect relations of the past to those of the present and future.¹⁹

Get this public rehearsal of the tropes of 'specialness' right, and media commentary largely reflects and reinforces a desirable impression of business as usual, with contemporary cooperation drawing legitimacy from the established and newly refreshed metanarrative of the special relationship. Get it wrong, however, and the fallout can be significant. Recall, for example, the Obama administration's gift in 2009 to Prime Minister Gordon Brown of 25 DVDs unplayable in the UK. Media portrayed this as an American move away from the special relationship and a personal slight upon the Prime Minister, who in stark contrast had thoughtfully presented the President with a first edition of a seven-volume biography of Winston Churchill and a pen holder carved from the timbers of the sister ship of HMS Resolute from which a desk in the Oval Office was made.²⁰ While this media commentary may seem superficial and trivial, officials recognise its significance for the optics of special relations, and that failure to manage the public face of special relations can in turn impact functional cooperation. Hence, as Obama settled into the White House, Richard LeBaron, the US deputy chief of mission in the UK, noted in February 2009 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.'²¹

A particular risk inherent in President-Prime Minister summits for British governments when managing the optics of special relations arises from perceptions of a Prime Minister being tarnished by association with an unpopular US president and/or overly supplicant. Prime Minister Blair's experience with the George W Bush administration was an impactful case in point. Had military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq gone well, then early comparisons of Blair-Bush meetings at Camp David with the wartime summits of Roosevelt and Churchill would have been consolidated and used to legitimise ongoing functional cooperation and renew the positive public facing narrative of special relations. In the event, though, Bush always lacked the popular appeal in the UK of his predecessor, President Clinton, and became increasingly disliked. As the post-9/11 wars unfolded, Blair became tainted by association with Bush and excoriated for his alleged suppliance to US policies. Beyond the personal cost, his popular representation as Bush's lap dog negatively framed Anglo-American relations for years to come by energising a long lineage of narratives railing against British subservience, driven variously by anti-Americanism, nostalgia and resentment.²² Such was the political fallout that the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee recommended in 2010 that British officials no longer use the nomenclature special relationship in regard to Anglo-American relations.²³

In this context, working with the Trump administrations has been challenging. First, Trump has proven consistently unpopular in the UK. This is most obvious in public opinion surveys. One set of polls across 2020–2025 indicated that the percentage of Britons liking Trump generally languished in the mid to high teens.²⁴ However, dislike of Trump extends into elite opinion too and has even been voiced publicly by government officials. Now former Foreign Secretary David Lammy once called Trump 'a racist KKK and Nazi sympathiser';²⁵ and Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy described him as a 'human rights nightmare'. Similarly, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Wes Streeting deemed Trump 'an odious, sad, little man' and delivered a broader insult to the American people: 'Imagine being proud to have that as your President.'²⁶ Add to this unpopularity Trump's unpredictable conduct, and the traditional British policy of seeking close Prime Minister-President personal relations is particularly risk laden for British leaders of all political persuasions. Indeed, this was brutally demonstrated in Trump's conduct with Prime Minister May. In 2017 he sparked a media frenzy when he broke diplomatic protocol with an unscripted and unsolicited holding of the Prime Minister's hand during her visit to Washington. And when Trump subsequently visited London in July 2018, he humiliated May by publicly lauding her political rivals and criticising her handling of Brexit.²⁷

The second challenge is that the Trump administrations have invested less consistent care in tending the public face of Anglo-American relations than any US administration since the Second World War. American messaging on the special relationship has consequently been inconsistent and at odds with the traditionally desired metanarrative of continuity in UK-US relations. For instance, in 2017 Trump returned a bust of Winston Churchill to the Oval Office that had been controversially removed by Obama.²⁸ In July 2018 Trump declared 'I would say I give our relationship, in terms of grade, the highest level of special.'²⁹ And in 2025 the UK and US concluded what the White House called a 'historic trade deal' that established 'a new paradigm for our special relationship.'³⁰ Yet on other occasions there has been a more transactional tone to Anglo-American relations, or worse. Remarks in the context of the Ukraine war by Vice President JD Vance about 'some random' peacekeeping country were interpreted as disparaging of British military forces.³¹ He also infamously suggested that Britain was undermining freedom of speech, placing the 'basic liberties of religious Britons in the crosshairs and had become 'maybe' the first 'truly Islamist' country with a nuclear weapon.³² In September 2025 Trump similarly criticised Britain. Speaking to the UN, he attacked Britain's environmental policies, taxing of North Sea oil and London Mayor Sadiq Khan's alleged determination to introduce shariah law into the city.³³

British officials have therefore encountered a conundrum. On the one hand, they rely on their American counterparts to help sustain functional cooperation and maintain the desired public face of special relations. Also, they are bound into this task by both political imperative and the powerful mythology of the special relationship – attempts to rebrand it as anything else have singularly failed.³⁴ On the other hand, risks of engaging Trump through traditional mechanisms used to manage the optics of special relations are high – in both international and domestic politics. Poignantly, for instance, shadow foreign secretary Emily Thornberry argued in 2019 that Trump should not have been granted a state visit to the UK because ‘A state visit is an honour, and we don’t think that this president deserves an honour...He is a sexual predator, he is a racist, and it’s right to say that.’³⁵ In consequence, while British officials have sought to maximise all avenues of diplomatic courtship of Trump and his administrations, those that extend beyond direct government-to-government public engagement have gained a particular attraction – and none more so than British royalty.

The soft power of British royalty

Within the capacity of the special relationship to invent and reinvent itself, one of the most remarkable transformations has been that of British royalty. From object of American ire, it metamorphosed into a British power of attraction that could penetrate all levels of American society and, because of its nominally apolitical character, avoid some of the suspicion often attached to the British government itself. But it is only relatively recently that greater attention has been paid to the constructive role of British royalty in Anglo-American relations.³⁶

Early positive influence of British royalty on Anglo-American relations long preceded the concept of soft power.³⁷ In 1860, for example, growing American fascination with British royalty was evident in the warmth of reception given to Prince Albert Edward, later to become King Edward VII, as he toured US cities including Chicago, Detroit and New York.³⁸ Subsequently, three developments helped royal influence become more significant to Anglo-American relations. First, nineteenth century political reforms eased the monarchy toward a more symbolic function in Britain whilst a concomitant maturation of the Republic diminished its longstanding ‘othering’ function within American political and identity formation.³⁹ Second, British and American societies have always tended to evolve in a type of political and social lock-step.⁴⁰ But in the late nineteenth century notions of Anglo-Saxonism helped draw the UK and US into the Great Rapprochement and shifted emphasis in the US from what separated the republic from the motherland towards what bound them.⁴¹ The British monarchy herein slowly became established as a progressive symbol of Anglo-American reconciliation and shared heritage. Third, as Hendershot argues, the influence of British royalty in the US benefitted from the growth of twentieth-century mass media and America’s distinctive emergent celebrity culture, with the development in the 1920s and 1930s of human-interest journalism helping to establish emotional connections between consumer and celebrity. The potential influence of royalty was boosted by their construction as being ‘both exotic and yet accessible to a wider spectrum of American society.’⁴²

It took some time before British, and American, governments began to purposively harness royal influence for the promotion of Anglo-American relations. One of the more famous early examples of this effort came as the Second World War loomed. In June 1939, with President Roosevelt struggling to move Congress and the American people away from isolationism, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth undertook the first visit to the US by reigning British monarchs. Their tour drew huge crowds and carefully reminded Americans of their ties to Britain, while its conclusion at Roosevelt’s Hyde Park home with a hot dog picnic and strawberry shortcake not only suggested Anglo-American solidarity but also continued the humanization of Britain’s royals in American culture.⁴³ Thereafter, the contribution of British royalty to quiet diplomacy and, especially, the public face of Anglo-American relations grew.

Since the Second World War the history, prestige and trappings of the British monarchy have consistently wooed American presidents; only President Johnson resisted a pilgrimage across the

Atlantic for a visit including a reception with the Windsors. Also, within the promotion of the special relationship, the bulk of endeavour was able to draw upon the great personal popularity and respect enjoyed by Queen Elizabeth II. In 2012, on the eve of her 60th anniversary on the throne, she recorded a remarkable American public approval rating of 82%.⁴⁴ Furthermore, American administrations have generally been keen during this time that British monarchs and other close members of the royal family visit the US. This creates bountiful opportunities to stage-manage the public face of the special relationship in knowledge that royal events will attract intense media coverage. Indeed, the *New York Times* reflected after President Biden met Queen Elizabeth II in June 2021 that 'on every presidential visit to Britain, it is the meeting with the queen that most symbolizes what diplomats on both sides still reflexively call the 'special relationship.'⁴⁵

For the purposes of this article, two forms of royal influence are particularly poignant to the elite maintenance of the special relationship – direct action, and a role within the narrative of special relations. The most obvious example of direct royal contributions to the special relationship are high profile events where American fascination with Royalty temporarily raises Britain's profile in the US and offers opportunity to remind British, American and global audiences of longstanding Anglo-American connection and the continued relevance of their partnership. By the 1970s British officials had even begun referring to state visits by the Queen as their 'big gun'.⁴⁶ In terms of greasing the wheels of cooperation, these visits were believed to create 'a short period of exceptional goodwill for Britain' in which diplomatic efforts enjoyed 'a unique opportunity to flourish'.⁴⁷ Just as importantly, royals could connect with American constituencies beyond the normal reach of British diplomacy and use speeches to routinely animate the mythology of the special relationship, highlight exceptional Anglo-American functional cooperation and send messages to multiple audiences about UK-US relations and current affairs. For example, the British Embassy in Washington reported that the Queen's visit to the US in July 1976 during the American bicentennial 'let loose a flood of warm sentiment about Britain and enabled Americans to pay a joyfully open tribute to the Queen and her husband, who command enormous respect and affection amongst old and young alike'.⁴⁸

Also important to the special relationship are royally afforded signs and symbols that can be carefully choreographed to generate impressions of affinity between Presidents and the British monarch. Grand receptions, commemorative engagements and sometimes celebration of personal shared interests are all co-modified to package President-monarch personal closeness both live in the moment and later, particular images, for example, being reconstituted in subsequent invocations of the special relationship. Consider, for instance, the love of horses shared by President Reagan and Queen Elizabeth II. Photographs of them riding the grounds of Windsor Castle together in June 1982 were an apotheosis of affinity and duly became part of the archive of Anglo-American heritage. Similarly, Royal gift giving and/or endorsement is designed not just to build personal bonds with American presidents but also to rehearse the narrative of special relations for 'overhearing audiences'.⁴⁹ For example, President Eisenhower hosted the first state dinner for Queen Elizabeth II in 1957 during her visit to the US to mark the 350th anniversary of the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia. As an event to heal rifts caused by the Suez crisis, the Queen gave Eisenhower, formerly Supreme Allied Commander who had led the American forces in Britain during the Second World War, a wooden coffee table topped with a map tracing the paths used by the ships before the D-Day invasion. Slightly different but still lending royal weight to the symbolism of special relations, was the Queen's visit to Philadelphia during the American bicentennial. Here she made the inaugural ring of a new 'Bicentennial Bell', which was an exact reproduction of the original Liberty Bell and cast by the same English company that had produced it over 200 years earlier.

A different royal contribution to the management of the public face of special relations concerns the monarch as a referent point in the evolution of special relations. Occasionally this comes directly from the symbolic juxtaposition of Royal presence and American settings where historically this would be anathema to the Republic. For example, in May 1991 Queen Elizabeth

It became the first reigning monarch to address a joint session of Congress. More common, however, is the use of the British monarchy in elite discourse as a historical marker of shared heritage and 'family reunited'. For example, President Reagan used a royal anecdote to frame his address to the British Parliament in 1982:

This is my second visit to Great Britain as President of the United States. 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.'⁵⁰

In this, and numerous other such examples, the British monarch is invoked not as a force of division but as a symbol of reconciliation and/or a vehicle to reconstruct centuries of Anglo-American estrangement as constituting little more than a 'family spat'.⁵¹ This feeds the naturalness narrative of Anglo-American association developed by Churchill and reinforces a sense of timelessness in special relations – the difficult past being represented as but a small bump in the road towards continuing fraternal association.

Trump and british royalty

Trump appreciates grandeur. This term the White House has already gained two large flagpoles, new gold decorations in the Oval Office, and a pledge by the President to co-finance a \$200 million modernisation of the East Wing of the White House and construction of a grand new ballroom.⁵² He also has a record of being attracted to fame, celebrity, status and glamour. By the start of his second term, governments around the world had learned the consequent particular value of personal flattery, prestigious set piece events, and opportunities for Trump to be seen centre stage with a country's most elite and newsworthy individuals. Within this battle for the President's attention and goodwill, Britain has sought any and every advantage. This includes Trump's Scottish heritage⁵³ and his golf interests, the latter facilitating in July 2025 a meeting with Prime Minister Starmer at the President's Turnberry course and plentiful opportunity to impression manage Anglo-American relations and what one commentator termed a 'burnishing' personal relationship.⁵⁴ However, Britain's 'trump card' has been the monarchy, an institution of unparalleled historical standing and prestige but attractive also to Trump's entrepreneurship as a highly successful contemporary business.⁵⁵

For example, the Starmer government twice coopted British royalty to help set a positive tone and impression of the special relationship with Trump's second administration. Following the November 2024 US election, it chose to reach out to then President elect Trump through the good offices of Prince William. The occasion in December 2024 was the ceremonial reopening of the Notre Dame and the meeting between Trump and Prince William reflected considerable institutional learning and diplomatic legwork. Then British ambassador Karen Pierce and Washington Embassy personnel were plugged into the Trump transition team and key people around the president elect much more effectively than had been the case in 2016. The obvious calculation was twofold. First, Prince William would be able to discuss the special relationship whilst Trump savoured being received by the heir to the British throne in the UK ambassador's residence in Paris, widely regarded as Britain's finest Embassy. Second, the meeting offered opportunity to manage the optics of the relationship. The participation of British royalty set Britain aside from other countries seeking Trump's attention and media coverage of the meeting cast Anglo-American relations in a warm glow. Kensington Palace duly described the meeting as 'warm and friendly'. Trump's complimentary if characteristically undiplomatically couched remarks about Prince William further added to the desired public impression of special relations.⁵⁶

The second time the Labour government enrolled British royalty to bridge-build with the new Trump administration was during Starmer's first bilateral meeting with Trump in Washington on 27 February 2025. Here the Prime Minister unveiled an invitation to the President from King Charles III for a second state visit. It was a moment of pure special relationship theatre. Placing a hand on Trump's shoulder, Starmer suggested a strong personal relationship with Trump whilst also explaining for the President, and the watching world, the import of this missive. 'This is really special. This has never happened before. Unprecedented...I think that just symbolizes the strength of the relationship between us...I think the last state visit was a tremendous success. His Majesty the King wants to make this even better than that. So, this is – this is truly historic.'⁵⁷ Crucially for British objectives, Trump reacted as desired, initial surprise being followed by recognition of the 'honour' of the invite and then effusive rhetoric in the subsequent press conference about Anglo-American relations: 'The prime minister and I have gotten off to an outstanding start. The US and UK have a special relationship, very special, really like no other, passed down through the centuries. And we're going to keep it that way. We're going to keep it very strong as it is.'⁵⁸ Trump also helpfully emphasised a change of White House décor that spoke to the special relationship: 'I'm pleased to say that the bust of one of the prime minister's greatest predecessors, Winston Churchill, is now back in the rightful place in the Oval Office and we're very proud of it.'⁵⁹

The *coup de grace* for the British, however, was not just their successful placement before Trump and the world of a carefully crafted letter from King Charles III. Rather, Trump's reverential handling of the letter before the cameras revealed publicly some of its contents. As one commentator noted 'It may as well have been an illuminated scroll.'⁶⁰ Specifically, the letter first framed the invite as a continuation of a royal relationship with the President – 'I remember with great fondness your visits to the United Kingdom during your previous Presidency'. It then moved into familiar special relationship prose, (re-)establishing joint responsibility for 'promoting' the values that 'matter so much to us all,' before concluding with a strong expression of confidence that 'working together, I know we will further enhance the special relationship between our two countries, of which we are both so proud.'⁶¹

Above all else, though, it is bilateral set piece occasions that most obviously foreground British royalty leveraging of the special relationship, and the British have invested unusually heavily in these with Trump. Trump has enjoyed two state visits, a working visit, and an attendance at Buckingham Palace in December 2019 alongside other national leaders to mark the 70th anniversary of NATO. These occasions facilitate quiet diplomacy and publicly celebrate the special relationship, renewing its narrative in line with contemporary circumstances and needs. The evident British intent has been to establish a 'feel-good' factor in Anglo-American relations and to hope that Trump's deference to the monarchy would both encourage him to reciprocate preferred British narratives on the special relationship and keep a notoriously freewheeling president on message. Analysis of the 2019 and 2025 state visits through the previously identified facets of royal influence - speeches, signs/symbols, and referent point - is instructive of this.

The Queen's remarks to Trump at the 2019 State banquet rehearsed familiar themes in the narrative of special relations of 'common values and shared interests'. She stressed Anglo-American armed collaboration in the defence of international security and shared values, the 'strength and breadth of our economic ties', and 'our strong cultural links and shared heritage'. As is often the case, and consistent with Churchill's construction of a timeless special relationship, the Queen also presented Anglo-American common purpose past and present within a continuum: 'As we face the new challenges of the twenty first century, the anniversary of D-Day reminds us of all that our countries have achieved together.' In addition, the Queen invoked Trump's Scottish ancestry as evidence of his having 'a particular connection to this country' and emphasised how 'Visits by American Presidents always remind us of the close and longstanding friendship between the United Kingdom and the United States.'⁶² This was an artful blend of personal flattery and symbolism - Trump's presence being placed within a tradition of Presidential visits to the UK that signify the enduring importance attached by both countries to the special relationship.

Trump's response included an expected lauding of cooperation during the Second World War and a desired affirmation of ongoing Anglo-American togetherness. He spoke of a 'bond between our nations...forever sealed' by the defeat of Nazism. He also used the 75th anniversary of D-Day to reciprocate the Queen's linkage of relations past, present and future: 'As we honor our shared victory and heritage, we affirm the common values that will unite us long into the future: freedom, sovereignty, self-determination, the rule of law, and reverence for the rights given to us by Almighty God.' All of this was standard – and much desired – fare. Much less conventional, but particularly illustrative of a royal role in leveraging special relations, was Trump's invocation of royal buildings and individuals as referents within a narrative of special relations. For example, Trump linked British wartime resilience with Buckingham Palace, stressing how during the Blitz it 'alone was bombed on 16 separate occasions', and invoked the monarchy as a symbol of the steadfastness of Britain and its dominions: 'Through it all, the Royal Family was the resolute face of the Commonwealth's unwavering solidarity.' Furthermore, Trump established a metonymic relationship between the Queen, shared values, and Anglo-American relations. He first commended her wartime Auxiliary Territorial Service for inspiring compatriots 'in that fight to support the troops, defend her homeland, and defeat the enemy at all cost.' He then positioned her 'as a constant symbol' of Anglo-American traditions and values, and an embodiment of 'the spirit of dignity, duty, and patriotism that beats proudly in every British heart.'⁶³

Six years later King Charles III's speech at the State banquet was again carefully tailored to flatter Trump, reaffirm the special relationship and give as little indication as possible of Anglo-American differences. The King accordingly foregrounded Trump's hereditary roots in the UK, the uniqueness of his second state visit, and the fact that Britain was the first nation with which his administration had concluded a trade deal. Anglo-American 'shoulder to shoulder' solidarity was emphasised, as was the exceptional functional cooperation enabling it: 'Our countries have the closest defense, security, and intelligence relationship ever known.' Standard reference was also made to a common language, shared heritage, 'deep friendship between our people', and enduring togetherness: 'We have celebrated together, mourned together, and stood together in the best and worst of times.' Slightly different, and salient for the arguments being made here, was King Charles III's use of commemoration diplomacy⁶⁴ – specifically the approaching 250th anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence and, implicitly, the monarchy's own transformation in the narrative of special relations: 'I cannot help but wonder what our forebears from 1776 would make of this friendship today. The rebel commander and pioneering first President George Washington famously vowed never to set foot on British soil. And my five-times great-grandfather, King George III, for his part, did not spare his words when he spoke of the revolutionary leaders. Today, however, we celebrate a relationship between our two countries that surely neither Washington nor King George III could possibly have imagined. The ocean may still divide us, but in so many other ways, we are now the closest of kin.'⁶⁵

Trump's response continued the style exhibited in 2019 of personal referents. For example, King Charles III 'epitomized the fortitude, nobility, and the spirit of the British monarchy and the British people.' However, the British would have been particularly pleased that, excepting a minor extemporisation to criticise the Biden administration and praise subsequent economic recovery, Trump stuck to a script that waxed lyrical about Anglo-American connection. The origins of connection were lauded: 'The British Empire laid the foundations of law, liberty, free speech and individual rights virtually everywhere the Union Jack has ever flown, including a place called America.' Joint credit for historical success and a vision of continuing shared mission was given too: 'we've done more good for humanity than any two countries in all of history. Together, we must defend the exceptional heritage that makes us who we are. And we must continue to stand for the values and the people of the English-speaking world.' Indeed, according to the President, seen from American eyes the word 'special' relationship 'does not begin to do it justice. We're joined by history and fate, by love and language, and by transcendent ties of culture, tradition, ancestry and destiny. We're like two notes in one chord or two verses of the same poem, each

beautiful on its own, but really meant to be played together. The bond of kinship and identity between America and the United Kingdom is priceless and eternal. It's irreplaceable and unbreakable.⁶⁶ The rhetoric, if not delivery, was thoroughly Churchillian. British officials could scarcely have dreamt of anything better for the optics of the special relationship.

The 2019 and, especially, 2025 state visits were also replete with carefully choreographed signs and symbols of special relations. A good example was reciprocal gift giving. In 2025 Trump gave King Charles III a replica of a President Eisenhower sword. Buckingham Palace officials described this as a symbol of the 'historical partnership that was critical to winning World War Two' and of 'the enduring values and cooperative spirit that continues to define the relationship between the United States and Great Britain'.⁶⁷ Meantime gifts from British monarchs were carefully selected not only to reinforce the narrative of special relations but also to appeal to Trump specifically and to indicate continuity in his relationship with the royal family. For example, the British had indulged Trump's fascination with Churchill during his 2018 working visit – not least by having him pictured sitting in Churchill's chair at Chequers.⁶⁸ In 2019 the Queen continued this theme, and the implicit recognition of enduring Anglo-American ties, by presenting Trump with an abridged first edition of Churchill's book *The Second World War*, reportedly printed in 1959 and finished in gold-tooled crimson with gilt edges and cypher, silk endpapers and hand-sewn headbands in the colours of the American flag.⁶⁹ And in 2025 Trump was given a personal viewing of Sir Winston Churchill's archives at Chequers. A similar continuity was provided for Trump through the Declaration of Independence. During the 2019 state visit the Queen showed the President and First Lady artifacts from the Royal Collection on display at Buckingham Palace, including a copy of the Declaration of Independence from the British Archive. In 2025 King Charles III foregrounded the Declaration in his banquet speech and gave Trump a bespoke, hand-bound leather book, crafted by the Royal Bindery in Windsor Castle, celebrating its 250th anniversary.

There are many more examples of signs and symbols being used during the state visits to convey an impression of special Anglo-American relation, ranging from multiple camera shots of monarch and Trump side-by-side through to the arrangement of national flags – including King Charles III's gift to Trump of the Union Jack that flew above Buckingham Palace on the day of the President's inauguration. However, the value should now be clear of British royalty in leveraging the special relationship, both directly – speeches, gift giving, ceremony and so forth – and indirectly as a referent within the narrative of special relations. Indeed, one royal historian fittingly described the 2025 state visit as a 'kind of a commercial for the monarchy in the sense of it showed people what the monarchy does in the realm of foreign affairs, personal diplomacy and international relations'.⁷⁰

British royalty and the long game

Anglo-American cultural connections constitute a vital wellspring of support for functional cooperation and the receptiveness of Britons and Americans to the narrative of special relations. And this has arguably never been more significant than in the Trump era. Previous fears that these cultural ties might weaken once power in the US moved from the eastern seaboard and immigration especially changed the cultural landscape of America proved largely unfounded. This owed not least to the 'melting pot' philosophy encouraging acceptance rather than rejection of an American way of life similar to that of the UK. However, new challenges to Churchillian assumptions of fraternal association have been posed by hardening American political polarisation, Trump's America First programme and the divisive domestic approach of his administrations. The cultural promotion of traditionally shared values is thus important for Anglo-American relations in outlasting Trump and within the longer term domestic political battle for America's future.

It is telling in this regard that British choreography of Trump's state visit in 2025 unusually made no effort to connect the President with 'ordinary' British citizens, instead targeting his ego

and seeking to safeguard these efforts against popular protest. Even more revealing is that, once popular protests caused Trump's first intended state visit to be downgraded in 2018 to a working visit,⁷¹ one senior British official suggested the detailed choreography of eventual State visit in 2019 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.'⁷² This reference to national chemistry speaks to a longer term game whereby reaffirming cultural connection helps minimise short term negative impact on the special relationship and prepares ground for a return to the status quo ante once a crisis, or presidential term, ends.

How Anglo-American relations improved during the Biden administration supports this practice, as more generally do opinion polls that suggest Britons and Americans disambiguate reasonably well between particular issues in UK-US relations, appreciation of the importance of one another's country to the other, and general senses of affinity. This was evident during the period 2017-18 when Trump's unpopularity forced the downgrade of his visit to the UK. British popular confidence in Trump's leadership ranked below 30%.⁷³ However, the US continued to be seen overwhelmingly as Britain's most important ally. An Opinium poll in February 2017 found that from a list of 13 options, 50% of Britons selected the US; Germany ranked second with just 9%.⁷⁴ Similarly, favourable views of the US hovered around 50%. This was consistent with trends identified by the Pew Centre across the years 2002-17 whereby favourable British attitudes fluctuated between 50% and 75%.⁷⁵ At the same time, British favourable opinion towards the American people was over 70%.⁷⁶

British royalty can, and does, play an important role in reaffirming shared Anglo-American values and maintaining a British profile in the US. During both of Trump's state visits the British monarch included in speeches praising the special relationship the importance of cultural connection. In 2019 Queen Elizabeth II cited the bond of 'our strong cultural links and shared heritage'⁷⁷ and six years later King Charles III highlighted reciprocal flows of people between the US and UK and how cultural relations continued to flourish 'with our actors, musicians, writers, and television presenters prospering in the hearts of transatlantic audiences.'⁷⁸ Interestingly, too, though the monarch must speak in careful tones and often veiled language, the Queen and the King reminded audiences of where Trump might differ from traditionally shared Anglo-American values and modus operandi. Hence, in 2019 Queen Elizabeth II noted poignantly that 'After the shared sacrifices of the Second World War, Britain and the United States worked with other allies to build an assembly of international institutions to ensure that the horrors of conflict would never be repeated. While the world has changed, we are forever mindful of the original purpose of these structures: nations working together to safeguard a hard-won peace.'⁷⁹ For his part, in 2025 King Charles III subtly implied Anglo-American agreement on several key issues that were in line with traditional UK-US cooperation but which the Trump administration appeared soft on. First, the King hinted that the US shared Britain's perspective on the Ukraine war: 'Today, as tyranny once again threatens Europe, we and our allies stand together in support of Ukraine to deter aggression and secure peace.' Second, with the US Defence Department announcing a review of the agreement, he proclaimed that 'our AUKUS submarine partnership with Australia sets the benchmark for innovative and vital collaboration.'⁸⁰

British royalty can also promote traditional Anglo-American shared values and the amity of the English-speaking peoples as Head of the Commonwealth. A poignant recent example is King Charles III's careful support for Canada amid controversy over Trump's ambition that the country should become the 51st state of the US. In March 2025 the King received new Canadian Prime Minister, and former governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney at Buckingham Palace. Prime Minister Starmer used the visit to stress that the UK and Canada had 'so much in common - shared history, shared values, shared King.'⁸¹ The King also made several symbolic gestures in support of Canada. For instance, in early March when visiting the aircraft carrier HMS Prince of Wales, the King wore a set of Canadian medals. He also presented a sword at Buckingham Palace to the 'Usher of the Black Rod', sent a message praising the 'proud, resilient and compassionate'

country upon the 60th anniversary of Canada's maple leaf flag, and sat on a Canadian chair during the Commonwealth Service in March 2025.⁸² These were followed by a visit to Canada in May 2025 where the King opened the 45th Canadian Parliament and delivered the 'speech from the throne' – noteworthy, the first time by a British monarch since 1977.

Finally, there is a diffuse royal cultural influence to consider too. Once Britain began to settle amongst the ranks of medium sized powers, one of the biggest challenges became gaining and holding American attention – at elite and popular levels alike. In 1967, for example, Ambassador Dean urged that 'we need to spread knowledge of a Britain which is not just thatched cottages and Beefeaters or mini-skirts and Beatles'.⁸³ Ironically, it has been the Beefeaters, or more especially those they guard, who have demonstrated significant capacity to maintain a British profile in the US and help reaffirm historical and cultural connections. Some of this influence flows from the monarchy's own efforts to attune the image of Britain's royal family to the times. For example, Queen Elizabeth II appeared in the film *Paddington* and participated in a James Bond sketch as part of the opening ceremony for the 2012 Olympics. Similarly, Royal events showcase signs, symbols and images of Britain and its monarchy to a global audience. For example, some twenty-three million Americans watched the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011,⁸⁴ and royals continue to represent Britain at important official functions – such as the visit in January 2025 of Prince Edward, Duke of Edinburgh, to the US on behalf of the King to pay his respects to former President Jimmy Carter. Furthermore, on occasions British royalty serves as a touchstone for Anglo-American debate about values, be that about the structure of family life, race, or how as a historical institution the monarchy potentially represents a socio-political stability currently lacking in US society. One example of this is the scrutiny of Meghan Markle's relationship with the House of Windsor and her representation in the media.⁸⁵

More generally, Britain's royalty serves as a valuable power of attraction for US citizens, 5.1 million of whom visited the UK in 2023.⁸⁶ American consumption of royal narratives, fiction and non-fiction, also helps maintain Britain in US consciousness and, in turn, extends the soft power of Britain's monarchy into American culture and values. For example, the lives of Britain's royals feed celebrity news and discussion, including the relocation to the US of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Similarly, Americans devour cultural products featuring British royalty across a wide spectrum of media – including television, radio, theatre, film, literature, and music. A long-established example is the enormous popularity of the James Bond industry, a celebration of Anglo-American intelligence cooperation.⁸⁷ But a seemingly insatiable American appetite for British royalty is reflected also in the success of productions including *The Crown*, *Bridgerton*, *Victoria*, *Queen Charlotte*, *The Tudors* and *Wolf Hall*, *The White Queen*, and *The Windsors*.

Conclusion

The contribution of British royalty to greasing the wheels of Anglo-American cooperation and managing the optics of the special relationship has been underappreciated. At moments of crisis especially, British governments have looked to the House of Windsor to help develop, energise, or even rebuild the special relationship. The 'hotdog picnic' helped warm American feelings towards Britain and eased Roosevelt's efforts to steer the US away from isolationism. Queen Elisabeth II's visit to the US in 1957 was a key part of efforts to rebuild Anglo-American relations after the Suez crisis. And the Queen's carefully choreographed participation in the US bicentennial celebrations supported efforts by President Ford and the governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan to repair damage to the special relationship incurred during the preceding Nixon administration.⁸⁸

In dealing with the Trump administrations, British governments have again enlisted the House of Windsor to build diplomatic bridges and manage the optics of special relations. Also, arguably more prominently than ever before, British royalty has served as a political buffer against downsides of close government association with a difficult president, whilst concomitantly helping

tend Anglo-American cultural connections. This recruitment has been unusually intense and stylistically distinct during the Trump era. The President's unpopularity and unpredictability have inclined British officials increasingly to separate political wooing of Trump from wider celebration of Anglo-American cultural connection, the 2025 state visit being the most extreme example of this where the President was kept well away from the British people and protestors. Meantime, American fascination with British royalty has helped the House of Windsor maintain Britain's profile in the US, subtly influence dialogue about values, and reinforce cultural connections that will outlast Trump's presidency.

Within this endeavour royals have been willing partners, not just because it is a long standing royal function but also because the monarchy itself needs to regather influence and public interest in the wake of Queen Elisabeth II's passing.⁸⁹ Media coverage of Trump's official visits to the UK de facto invited British royals – and Britain – into the homes of millions of Americans irrespective of political creed. It also, together with Prince William's meeting with Trump in Notre Dame, artfully promoted the next generation of royals to the American public – opinion polls already indicate the Prince and Princess of Wales to be more popular in America than King Charles III.⁹⁰ This royal wooing of Trump may have little impact on Anglo-American policy differences, but it nevertheless created opportunity for careful diplomatic exchange and, especially, promoting favourable optics for the special relationship. Indeed, on the back of his latest State visit to the UK, Trump reportedly favoured inviting King Charles III, and possibly other royals, to visit the US during its semi quinquennial celebrations.⁹¹ Were this to happen, the monarchy would have arguably its best chance since 1976 to promote the special relationship and a feel good factor about Britain in the US at a particularly propitious moment in American politics.

Notes

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