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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Anglo-American 'Special Relationship'

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The Anglo-American relationship has been of central importance to Britain's international policy since the early years of the Second World War, when the need to win American sympathy and material aid seemed essential to national survival, especially after the fall of France in June 1940. A sophisticated propaganda campaign was launched in North America, and by 1941 Britain was heavily dependent on US aid, much of it from Franklin Roosevelt's 'lend-lease' programme, even just to continue fighting. Once America was directly forced into the war, as a result of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the two 'Anglo-Saxon' countries fought closely side by side. They enjoyed extensive economic co-operation, launched joint military operations in North Africa, Europe and the Far East, and developed agreed plans for the post-war world. The fact that the two countries were brought together at such a desperate time helped forge a close relationship whose durability was reinforced by a common language, cultural heritage and commitment to an 'open' global trading system, a powerful combination of shared attitudes and shared national interests.

Over the following decades, as the British empire came to an end and Britain became a member of the European Community, the so-called 'special relationship'[1] with Washington remained a prime concern for almost all governments in London, sometimes to the distress of those who wanted to see a more fulsome commitment to a European future. Though sometimes dismissed as an empty phrase, the 'special relationship' repeatedly re-emerged from the doldrums: in the Macmillan years following the 1956 Suez crisis; in the Reagan–Thatcher period, following two decades of declining British fortunes; and again at the end of the century after a troubled period under John Major and Bill Clinton. This chapter will provide a chronological review of the Anglo-American relationship, while also drawing out some of the main undercurrents that have shaped its character and helped it to survive.

World War and the Origins of the Cold War

However close Britain and America may often seem, the two have always preserved individual national interests that have sometimes driven them apart, and one of the difficulties in understanding the relationship over time is discerning how and when policies combine or diverge. Sometimes, given the broad, global involvements of both powers, it has been possible to discern rancour in one area simultaneous with close co-operation in others. In October 1983, for example, when the partnership between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan seemed particularly friendly, both being firm anti-communists and advocates of laissez-faire economics, relations were thrown into disarray by the US invasion of the small Caribbean island of Grenada, which happened to be a member of the Commonwealth and of which the queen was head of state. Even the wartime relationship was fraught with tension. The Americans, with their own origins as opponents of colonial rule, were unsympathetic to British imperialism, and Roosevelt was less keen than Churchill to resuscitate the French empire. There were particularly difficult arguments about the future of South-East Asia, and while, in the short term, London might have been able to restore imperial control to those areas overrun by the Japanese, in the long term the wartime success of the United States and another anti-colonial power, the Soviet Union, helped create an atmosphere in which colonialism had, quite simply, become unfashionable. Other disagreements surrounded the particular military strategy to pursue against Germany (where Churchill, some would argue, inveigled the Americans into Mediterranean adventures when it might have been possible to launch an earlier invasion of France) and how to deal with third major ally, the Soviet Union (with both Churchill and Roosevelt willing to go behind each other's back to bid for the favour of Joseph Stalin). By the end of the war there was no longer an equal partnership. The Royal Navy was about half the size of the American one, America alone had possession of the atomic bomb and, whereas Britain had become the world's greatest debtor, the US was its greatest creditor. In 1945 the new realities of world power were underlined in ways that almost seemed calculated to enrage London: Washington monopolized the occupation of Japan, refused to share the atomic secret despite the contribution of British scientists to its discovery, and would only grant a substantial loan on strictly commercial terms, with a rate of interest that some in Britain saw as exploitative.[2]

Despite the election of a socialist Labour administration under Clement Attlee in July 1945, the immediate post-war years proved the resilience of the relationship. Both powers played a leading role in trying to create a liberal-democratic world order through the creation of the United Nations and its economic and monetary equivalents, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which were designed to foster a stable trading environment and prevent a return to the 'slump' of the 1930s. Then, when the Soviet Union seemed likely to threaten this new order, the Anglo-Saxon powers became the closest of allies in the 'Cold War' that followed. In 1947 Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin played a leading role in west European acceptance of the Marshall Plan, a US-financed package that helped the continent's recovery over the following years. Two years later he helped bring about the North Atlantic Treaty, a guarantee of the continent's future military security and of considerable psychological importance to a region feeling threatened by Soviet invasion. Britain and America also worked closely together in Germany, agreeing to unite their two occupation zones in 1946, to create (along with France) a West German state in 1948–9 and even (despite French doubts) to support German rearmament after 1950. Bevin proved reluctant to join in moves towards a more politically and economically integrated Europe, even when Washington backed this as the best way to build up a self-reliant western Europe where communism had no appeal and in which German power could be controlled. But he did begin a tradition of ‘Atlanticism’ in British foreign policy, which saw the maintenance of the US military commitment to Europe as being of central significance.[3]

The Labour government of 1945–51 also had some success in portraying itself as a significant *global* ally of Washington, not least in financial terms, with close consultations over the devaluation of sterling in 1949, while the independence of India in 1947 helped blunt American dislike of British imperialism. Indeed, as the British empire entered terminal decline, the British economy failed to recover its position in the world and British armed forces shrank, the US discovered that it was often forced to assume the former responsibilities of its transatlantic partner. The most celebrated case was in the eastern Mediterranean in early 1947, when the Americans were told that London could no longer prop up the regimes in Greece and Turkey, and the response was the ‘Truman Doctrine’, generally seen as the public enunciation of the US policy of ‘containment’: in asking Congress for aid to Greece and Turkey, President Harry Truman focused not on the British financial worries that had actually sparked the crisis, but on the supposed threat to both countries from Soviet communism. A similar pattern would later be seen elsewhere. In the Middle East, British humiliation in the 1956 Suez crisis was quickly followed by increased US involvement under the ‘Eisenhower Doctrine’, and in the Persian Gulf around 1971, where British retreat led Richard Nixon’s administration to build up the shah of Iran as a local ally and strongman, with dire consequences when his regime collapsed in 1978, giving way to an Islamist regime.

Ironically, the United States, the former British colony, now greatly valued the British empire as it entered its last phase. In the contest with the Soviet Union, the US did not want to see British positions collapse precipitately. Besides, British possessions could provide military bases, such as that on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, developed in the 1970s, and intelligence outposts such as Hong Kong, which proved valuable for several decades as a listening-post against China. Through the vicissitudes of the political ‘special relationship’, it seems there has been rather greater consistency of friendship on the levels of defence and intelligence, even if many events in those fields remain ‘unseen’ to the public. Even on the defence and intelligence fronts the relationship has had its hiccups. Britain’s cancellation of the purchase of F-111 aircraft in 1968, alongside the decision to quit all bases ‘east of Suez’, weakened the value of the defence relationship,[4] while that in intelligence was strained by a series of British espionage embarrassments, from the Klaus Fuchs case of 1946 to the Profumo scandal of 1963, though the worst moment probably came with the defection of two Foreign Office officials, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, in 1951. Nonetheless, if one is looking for tangible reasons why the special relationship has survived numerous particular crises and such long-term changes as Britain’s relative decline in world affairs and entry to the European Community, then the mutual benefits of an intelligence and defence axis should be rated highly,[5] alongside the common interest in a global economy open to trade and the security brought about by fostering liberal democratic regimes.[6]

It is difficult to believe that such intangibles as a common cultural heritage and language have been as important as hard-headed security interests in tying Britain and America together. Yet it is unlikely that their relationship would have its 'special' flavour without these intangible elements.[7] Some of the most interesting historical research on Anglo-American links during the Cold War is now focused on cultural elements: on the ways in which they co-operated in publicity campaigns and propaganda, and other schemes in the battle for hearts and minds.[8]

Regional Problems: The Far East and Middle East

The special relationship went through one of its most difficult points at the end of the Attlee period due to tensions that arose over the Korean War, which broke out in June 1950 after forces from communist North Korea invaded the pro-western South, leading to a US-led, but UN-sanctioned, intervention to save South Korea. Here the American military contingent dwarfed that of the British Commonwealth, and Washington's bellicosity led the British to fear that a general war might break out, especially after communist China entered the conflict in November 1950.[9] A further sign of Britain's declining importance in the whole Asia-Pacific region was that Australia and New Zealand, two of the original members of the British Commonwealth, now looked to America to guarantee their security through the 1951 ANZUS pact. The Korean conflict established something of a pattern for Anglo-American relations in the Far East in the 1950s and 1960s.[10] The British were quite ready to defend their own interests, especially in Malaya, where there was an anti-communist emergency from 1948 to 1960 and a military confrontation with Indonesia from 1963 to 1966. In both operations a substantial number of British troops were involved. But these interests were not felt worth fighting a world war over, so London took a more restrained line in the two Quemoy–Matsu crises between America and China (1954 and 1958–9), as well as in recurrent crises over Indochina. In 1954 Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden acted as co-chair, with the Soviet Union, of the Geneva conference that created a communist regime in North Vietnam, while Harold Macmillan's government supported a peaceful resolution of internal differences in Laos during a renewed Geneva conference in 1961–2. This is not to say that London and Washington were for ever at loggerheads or that London consistently sought peace. A recent study of the Macmillan–Kennedy years by Peter Busch has emphasized that the British did back resistance to communist advances in South-East Asia and provided some aid to South Vietnam.[11] But the British were less willing to run risks in the Far East as a whole and often showed a preference for limiting communist advances, not through toughness, but through a readiness to 'neutralize' certain countries as a barrier between the two blocs. A tendency to buy off enemies can be seen as a well-established part of the British diplomatic tradition, but it can only have been underlined by their declining wealth and power relative to the superpowers and by growing vulnerability of the British Isles to a Soviet nuclear assault. More especially, in the Far East, the tendency was reinforced by the local power of communist China and the exposed position of Hong Kong, Britain's key colonial remnant in the region once Malaya and Singapore became independent, and which was not given up until 1997.

In the Middle East, however, where British interests were more widespread and its armed forces more numerous, the situation was different. Here it was the Americans who tended to be critical of British decision-making. After Indian independence in 1947 the Middle East became of central importance to Britain's world role because, while Aden was the only actual Crown colony in the area, London had a series of treaty relationships with states from the Persian Gulf to Libya, with Egypt at the centre. The region was also oil-rich, of immense strategic significance (placed as it was at the crossroads between Europe, Asia and Africa) and, thanks to the Suez Canal, of central importance to world trade. In the immediate post-war years London and Washington had fallen out over British restrictions on Jewish immigration into Palestine, ahead of the independence of Israel, whose creation the Truman administration strongly backed despite British fears that it would complicate relations with the Arabs. Britain's position in the region depended, to an extent, on good relations with the Arabs and other local peoples, but there was an inevitable tendency to back the 'right' kind of locals, especially traditional monarchies and sheikhdoms that were increasingly threatened by radical forms of nationalism. The Americans were suspicious of radical groups too, but Washington often feared that British imperialist methods were only encouraging resistance and driving reformers into the hands of the communists.[12] When the government of Mohammed Mussadeq nationalized British oil interests in (non-Arab) Iran, in 1951, the Americans opposed tough action at first, though they were eventually won round to a coup against him. Carried out in 1953 thanks to a joint intelligence operation, the coup brought back to power a monarchical regime under the shah. At the same time, American oil companies increased their share in the Iranian oil industry, which had been a virtual British monopoly before 1951, a reminder that, even when Britain and America did work closely together, the element of competition based on national interests still survived.[13]

It was particularly over Egypt, the most populous Arab state, that the US feared Britain's imperialist tendencies could throw the whole non-aligned world into the arms of the Soviet bloc. In the early 1950s the US was unenthusiastic about British attempts to push Egypt into a pro-Western regional defence structure but also concerned over the radicalism of the military-dominated regime that overthrew the Egyptian monarchy in 1952. When the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 the Americans were partly to blame: dismayed by his purchase of weapons from the Soviet bloc, the administration of Dwight Eisenhower had cut funding for his pet project, the Aswan dam. Once the British, as the main shareholders in the canal, became involved in a rancorous dispute with Nasser, the US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, supported a diplomatic solution. Then, when Britain, in league with France and Israel, launched a military operation against Egypt the Americans condemned it and brought financial pressures to bear in order to force a British retreat. The Suez crisis, often seen as a turning point for Britain's world role, tended if anything to restate the importance of preserving the special relationship, not least in the Middle East itself. Thereafter, London was inclined to act in the Middle East only in close co-operation with Washington. They jointly acted to stabilize Jordan and the Lebanon in 1958, for example, in the wake of the overthrow of the pro-British monarchy in Iraq, and there was an airlift of British forces to Kuwait in 1960, when an Iraqi invasion first seemed likely.[14]

After 1966 the British seemed to be set on a retreat from the region, with the traditionalist elements in the Arab world also destined for oblivion. Aden was abandoned to a Marxist regime in 1967; Libya, home to US and British bases, fell under the control of Colonel Gadaffi in 1969 with barely a protest; and in 1971 came Britain's departure from the Persian Gulf, which led the Americans to build up the shah as a local policeman.[15] However, once it was clear that certain monarchs and sheikhs could survive in the Middle East, that radicals like Gadaffi were not susceptible to co-operation and that Western economic interests were too precious to leave at the mercy of local political trends, there was a remarkable revival of Anglo-American co-operation in the region that almost suggested that Britain's value to Washington as a *global* partner had never actually ended. True, the US might be better disposed than Britain to the Zionist case in the Arab–Israeli dispute, but the only serious rift over this was a short-lived difference in 1973 (discussed below), and far more noteworthy was British support for American air raids on Libya in 1986, the scale of British involvement in the Gulf War of 1990–1, and the position of the two countries at the head of the 'coalition' that overthrew Saddam Hussein of Iraq in 2003. The last two operations again showed the difficulties, first faced by Nixon, of stabilizing the Persian Gulf and protecting Kuwait from Iraqi ambitions once a permanent British presence was removed.

Macmillan and Kennedy

The Suez crisis had taken place under Anthony Eden, whose ill-starred premiership it helped to bring to a hasty end. The 'special relationship', in so far as it has ever existed, has been wrapped up in personal ties and much of the literature focuses on the attitudes of particular leaders, not least Winston Churchill, who tried to forge a close friendship with Roosevelt during the Second World War, gave intellectual justification to a Cold War partnership in his 'Iron Curtain' speech of March 1946, and tried to rekindle wartime comradeship with Truman and Eisenhower as prime minister in 1951–5. It should be noted that the good, day-to-day functioning of the relationship was also affected by the close rapport that often existed between officials at lower levels, the diplomats, military men and intelligence officers who had to work with their transatlantic counterparts. The role of British ambassadors to Washington, such as Oliver Franks under Truman and David Ormsby Gore (Lord Harlech) under Kennedy has been seen as particularly significant. Both these men had access to and high standing with the most senior members of the US government, allowing them to influence policy on, for example, the Korean War and nuclear relations.[16] In the wake of Suez, it might have been expected that the British would feel betrayed by American policy and, indeed, a paper was put before the Cabinet in January 1957 by the Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, arguing that Britain should now help to build a third nuclear power in western Europe.[17] Most ministers, however, were still determined to maintain a global outlook in foreign and defence policy, working in close co-operation with Washington, whose importance to Britain's security and economic well-being had just been cruelly underlined. Within days Eden had been succeeded by Harold Macmillan who, despite his later reputation as a 'pro-European', made it his first priority to rebuild links with America. In March 1957, when the Treaty of Rome was signed, bringing into being the European Economic Community (EEC), Macmillan was focused on his first summit meeting with Eisenhower, with whom he had worked in wartime North Africa.

Like Churchill before him, Macmillan could sometimes offend the Americans with his enthusiasm for playing the mediator in East-West contacts and his urging of summit meetings with Soviet leaders. But he was more reliable than Eden or, for that matter, France's Charles de Gaulle, who came to power in 1958 and there were no crises equivalent to Korea or Suez during Macmillan's six years in office. Realizing the inequality in the special relationship, he was keen to develop a situation of 'interdependence' through which the US would find it difficult to make decisions without reference to Britain. Military ties were reinforced by the proposed purchase of an American-made missile, Skybolt, to carry Britain's supposedly 'independent' nuclear deterrent. Washington propped up the value of the pound for the sake of global economic stability. And, after years of urging by US officials, London became more open to an application to join the EEC. What was most surprising about Macmillan's period, perhaps, was that he had just as good a relationship with John F. Kennedy in 1961–3 as he did with Eisenhower. Despite considerable differences of age and temperament JFK and 'Supermac' got on warmly. They shared a similar, cautious, though firmly anti-communist approach to problems like Laos, Berlin, even the Cuban missile crisis, during which some American writers, such as Arthur Schlesinger and Theodore Sorensen,[18] have sensed a real influence for Macmillan in the White House, helped by Kennedy's friendship with Ambassador Ormsby Gore.[19] And when British plans to buy Skybolt were threatened by the cancellation of the project, Kennedy proved ready to sell Macmillan an alternative system, the submarine-based Polaris, when they met at Nassau in December 1962. The president did so despite opposition from some of his advisers, who wanted to reduce the number of nuclear powers in the world. The possession of a nuclear arsenal was vital to British status at a time of imperial retreat, especially since France was developing its own system. The Polaris deal added a significant new dimension to the special relationship in defence, providing another long-term link between London and Washington that included not only the US provision of a missile system, but also joint policies on targeting and the testing of warheads.[20] In the late 1960s the Labour government decided against purchasing a new American missile system, Poseidon, but the subsequent attempt to improve the British Polaris missiles through the 'Chevaline' project proved a costly failure. It was clear that, if Britain wanted to remain an effective nuclear power, with weapons that could penetrate Soviet defences, it would have to buy a new system from America, hence the deal on Trident missiles concluded by the Thatcher administration in 1980.[21]

The Relationship in Crisis? 1963–1974

The Kennedy–Macmillan years ended in failure in that the Polaris deal furnished de Gaulle with the perfect excuse to veto Britain's application to join the EEC, which in turn contributed to Macmillan's fall from power later in the year. The assassination of Kennedy soon afterwards showed the danger of basing the relationship too much on personalities. Yet, there was much more to Anglo-American co-operation than friendship at the highest level and, in a sense, the genuine durability of the alliance was shown during the difficulties of the following 18 years, a period that is only now being opened to archival research. There is some consensus in the literature that, during the years 1964–8, Harold Wilson's relations with Lyndon Johnson were much less good than the prime minister believed them to be, and this period can seem to be in stark contrast to the Macmillan–Kennedy era.[22] It is difficult to disagree with the judgement that 'no personal rapport developed between the rough-spoken Texan and the wily British Prime Minister'.[23] The decline seems to have been due to the president rather than the prime minister. Johnson, while he was of English descent and respected Britain's stand in 1940, had little personal knowledge of the country. The British still had well-placed friends in Washington, but the president had no favourites when it came to foreign leaders and judged them by what they could do to help America. He was less secure in foreign affairs than he was at home and offended some visiting leaders, even cancelling visits by the Pakistani and Indian premiers at short notice.

Where Anglo-American relations were concerned, it is significant that relations at the highest level had already been in trouble *before* Wilson took office. Johnson got on poorly with Lord Harlech – perhaps because the ambassador had been so close to Kennedy – and considered Macmillan's immediate successor, Alec Douglas-Home, to be stuffy. The only summit between Johnson and Douglas-Home, in February 1964, saw a rift about, of all things, the mundane issue of the sale of British buses to Cuba. The president vainly tried to persuade the prime minister to reverse the decision; then, Douglas-Home, despite his great experience of foreign affairs, told the press outside the White House that there would be no change of policy. At leaders' level, the decline in the 'special relationship' from the Macmillan–Kennedy years can be dated to this point, so that the short-lived Douglas-Home administration assumes some importance.[24]

By the mid-1960s, on defence, international economic questions, East–West relations and South-East Asia in particular, it hardly seemed possible for London to act without reference to what Washington desired. In the early years of the Johnson presidency in particular, the US actively tried to shape Britain's economic and defence policies in order to keep the country involved east of Suez and maintain the value of the pound as a 'first line of defence' for the dollar. Johnson and some of his officials hoped to embroil the British in Vietnam. The British were well aware of their dependence on America for military security and financial support, but the fact that Harold Wilson was able to avoid sending troops to Vietnam, even if he did feel obliged to provide diplomatic support for 'LBJ's war', showed that Washington was unable to 'dictate' policy to London. So too did the decision to devalue sterling in November 1967, followed by the announcement of withdrawal from military involvement east of Suez two months later. By the mid-1960s, however, Britain was becoming merely one ally among many, far less powerful than its transatlantic partner. Other countries, such as Germany or Israel, could claim a 'special' relationship of sorts with Washington because of their value in key areas of the world and, from the US perspective, British claims to a privileged position could be embarrassing in dealings with other countries. Another factor was the questioning of the special relationship at a popular level. Anti-Americanism was not new in Britain, indeed it could be traced back to the war years when there was some popular resentment at the presence of US forces.[25] But, in common with other west European countries, it reached a new intensity in the mid-1960s thanks to the Vietnam War, with several large demonstrations outside the US embassy in Grosvenor Square, some of them violent.

With good reason, many authors see a marked decline in the relationship in 1966–8 owing to the British refusal to fight in Vietnam, their retreat from East of Suez, and the devaluation of the pound. It is a point supposedly symbolized by the singing of ‘I’ve got plenty of nothing’ and ‘The Road to Mandalay’ when Wilson visited the White House in February 1968, soon after announcing the end of the military presence in Singapore and the Persian Gulf.[26] Alan Dobson shares this approach, but makes an interesting distinction between the declining *importance* of the relationship, as Britain became less significant in world affairs, and its *quality*, which could still be considered good thanks to the willingness of individuals to continue working closely together.[27] It is an idea echoed in Johnson’s remark to the journalist Henry Brandon, in February 1968, that Britain and America ‘will always remain friends. But, of course, when our common interests shrink, the flow of communications and common business shrinks too.’[28] Whatever the truth about his relationship with Wilson, the two countries continued to co-operate well enough on the pressing issues of the day. As John Baylis points out, despite the retreat from east of Suez and differences over Vietnam, London and Washington ‘worked in close partnership’ on such diplomatic challenges as the Six Day War, between Israel and the Arabs in June 1967, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.[29] He might have added that the partnership was also close over the Rhodesian problem, which began in 1965 with an illegal declaration of independence from Britain by a white supremacist regime, and the Nigerian civil war of 1967–70. On both these African issues Washington was happy to leave London to take a lead, showing that, even as the withdrawal from east of Suez got under way, Britain could still help limit the international burdens of the United States.[30]

One believer in the alliance was Henry Kissinger, the president’s National Security Adviser (1969–75) and Secretary of State (1973–7). He found that ‘the special relationship with Britain was peculiarly impervious to abstract theory’, or to particular crises, and advised the new president, Richard Nixon, in February 1969, that ‘we do not suffer from such an excess of friends that we should discourage those who feel that they have a special friendship for us’.[31] There is general agreement that the short-lived Wilson–Nixon relationship, in 1969–70, was quite good and probably better than that between Johnson and Wilson, although how much better is debatable. There was no great warmth between Nixon and Wilson – the president recoiled from the latter’s suggestion, made at their first meeting, that they use first names – but nor did it witness the contempt that Johnson had brought to relations. The prime minister did all he could to get the new relationship off to a good start, even inviting Nixon to a meeting with ministers in the Cabinet room, as well as one-to-one talks at Chequers, when the president first visited in February 1969. When Wilson visited Washington in January 1970, Nixon repaid him for the Downing Street talks by having him attend a National Security Council meeting, complete with a tame discussion on policy towards Europe. In the 1970 election Nixon was evidently pleased with the Conservative victory but, ironically, Anglo-American relations were about to enter into one of their most difficult phases. There was no major crisis equivalent to the Korean War or the Suez crisis, but in a way the situation was more serious because fundamental and sustained differences seemed to be opening up.

The Heath–Nixon years are often seen as the most barren period for the special relationship. On the surface Heath and Nixon had many similarities, personally aloof and rather lonely individuals, conservative and firmly anti-communist in political outlook. Their personal loyalty to the Atlantic alliance can hardly be doubted. But Edward Heath's priority overseas was to secure admission to the EEC after two vetoes from Charles de Gaulle (the second after an application from Wilson in 1967). Heath was well aware that one of the reasons for the vetoes was the French fear that Britain would become a 'Trojan horse' for American influence in Europe and he was keen to remove this, avoiding all use of the term 'special relationship' in preference to talk of a 'natural relationship'.[32] The problems were not all one-sided however. Nixon's priorities abroad were to extricate America from Vietnam and to try to balance Soviet power while running less risk of military conflict, especially since a position of 'mutually assured destruction' now existed. Nixon also had to deal with the relative decline of American economic power, with balance of payments problems and a weak dollar. These priorities led to a certain neglect of the Atlantic alliance, with decisions being taken without reference to major allies, even Britain. The tendency towards sudden faits accomplis was particularly evident in the two 'Nixon shocks' of July and August 1971, when the US 'opening to China' in the Far East was announced, and Washington put an end to the post-war monetary system by which Western currencies had been 'pegged' against the value of the dollar. The latter decision in particular had a profound effect on British policy, deepening the sense of global currency instability and threatening to harm trade. The Americans did still show some 'special' treatment to Britain. Kissinger, for example, kept London partially informed of talks with the Soviets on strategic arms limitation.[33] But in the main détente was now a US–Soviet affair, without any of the multilateral summits so favoured by Churchill and Macmillan. The Heath government even seemed to lag behind in the efforts at East–West détente in these years, expelling more than a hundred Soviet diplomats in 1971 on suspicion of spying. In 1973, with Britain now safely in the EEC, the two countries appeared to drift further apart. It did not help that, having supported a strong integrated Europe since the late 1940s, Washington now began to see the EEC more as a powerful trade rival. But even when Kissinger did try to improve transatlantic relationships by announcing a 'Year of Europe' in April, west Europeans were unenthusiastic. The French feared a reworking of American domination and Heath was critical of Kissinger's presumption that only America could decide when Europe's problems could be addressed. In any case, during October, a sudden outbreak of war in the Middle East pushed the Year of Europe into the background and provoked more transatlantic differences. In the short term there were disagreements over America's right to use its bases in Europe to supply Israel with arms, and Heath, along with other EEC leaders, was angered by the US move to a high level of nuclear alert at one point in the conflict. In the long term the war, in which the Arabs cut oil supplies to some Western countries, highlighted Europe's reliance on Middle East oil and tended to make Britain and other countries more sympathetic to the Arab case in subsequent years, while America continued to favour Israel.[34]

The Relationship Revived, 1974–1989

The Americans could be forgiven for welcoming Wilson back into office in February 1974. He and his successor as prime minister in 1976, James Callaghan, remained convinced 'Atlanticists' despite left-wing Labour criticism of the Americans. Callaghan got on well with both Kissinger, who stayed on as Secretary of State under the presidency of Gerald Ford (1974–7), and Jimmy Carter, president from 1977 to 1981. Callaghan was even able to play a mediatory role between America and NATO's European members in 1979, during discussions on the updating of the alliance's nuclear systems. At the same time, however, these years saw a continuing decline in British fortunes, notably in the economic crisis of 1976 that forced Britain to adopt spending restraints as the price of a substantial rescue package from the International Monetary Fund.[35] The Americans smoothed the way for the deal, but left-wingers saw this as part of a policy of shoring up capitalism in Britain at the cost of higher unemployment and lower social spending. In contrast to the Heath period, the only significant diplomatic differences occurred over the former colony of Cyprus in 1974, when the British were disappointed that the Americans did not do more, first to prevent a Greek-sponsored coup on the island, then to prevent a Turkish invasion of its northern half. There was also some initial British suspicion of US attempts to play a greater role in resolving the long-running Rhodesia dispute, but co-operation became closer here and ultimately helped bring about the legal independence of Rhodesia as Zimbabwe in 1979–80, the first year of the Thatcher premiership. In general, then, the years 1974–9 can be seen as a revival of co-operation after the coolness of the Heath years, but with Britain continuing to decline in importance in American eyes. A real revival of the special relationship had to await the coming to power of Ronald Reagan in January 1981.

Reagan's two terms as president fell entirely within Margaret Thatcher's period as prime minister.[36] Each admired the other's country; they were personally close, despite a certain condescension in Thatcher's attitude towards her American counterpart; and, importantly, they shared a common ideology, based on strong anti-communism abroad and free market economics at home. Indeed Thatcher's policies of 'rolling back the state' by restraining social expenditure, fostering enterprise and 'privatizing' state-owned companies were something of a model for Reagan's domestic programme. In contrast to Heath she was no 'Euro-enthusiast'; indeed, her interest in remaining a member of the EEC was based partly on the belief that it helped to strengthen NATO. As to specific foreign issues, the two frequently walked in step even when other Western leaders were critical of Reagan as a dangerous extremist. During his first term, Thatcher supported his aid to the anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan, worked in the face of considerable domestic opposition to deploy American Cruise and Pershing missiles in Britain, and even backed the controversial 'Star Wars' defence initiative for a space-based anti-ballistic missile system. It was not just in the revived Cold War of the early 1980s that the two were close, however. They adopted a common strategy towards South Africa, favouring 'constructive engagement' with the apartheid regime rather than calls for its international isolation; they propped up Saddam Hussein's Iraq during its war with Iran; and they even found common cause in the Americas, where, after some dithering, Reagan backed Britain during the Falklands war with Argentina,[37] while Thatcher helped isolate the radical regime of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. In supporting Reagan, Thatcher was repeatedly ready to fall out with her EEC partners and with pro-Europeans in her own party, not least when she backed an American company to take over the troubled Westland helicopter company and when she supported American air strikes on Libya, both in 1986. The 1983 Grenada crisis was a reminder that differences of view were still possible, and there was no place for Thatcher in the US–Soviet summits that revived in the mid-1980s.[38] But if anything Thatcher's influence was then at its height, because she early on identified Mikhail Gorbachev as a Soviet leader with whom it was possible 'to do business' and, in an apparent about-turn for them both, she and Reagan became joint enthusiasts for relaxing Cold War tensions.

After the Cold War

Thatcher's relations with Reagan's successor, George Bush, were less close, especially when the retreat of Soviet power from central Europe raised the possibility of German reunification. While Thatcher had grave doubts about the revival of a strong, united Germany at Europe's heart, Bush had one of his greatest successes in fostering reunification, and some of his advisers believed it would be wiser in future to treat Germany as Washington's key ally in Europe. Amid the uncertainties bred by the end of the Cold War, however, with the future of NATO thrown into doubt, the Gulf War of 1990–1 showed that, by backing Washington in Third World conflicts where other European countries were less able to act, Britain could still win influence in America and play a role on the world stage. The following years suggested that the Gulf episode was a last gasp of the special relationship, the demise being underlined by the replacement of Thatcher by John Major in the middle of the crisis. He got on well enough with Bush, but there were repeated strains in the relationship after Bill Clinton became president in January 1993. It did not help that the Conservatives had ill-advisedly helped the Bush camp during the 1992 presidential election. Despite having had part of his education at Oxford, Clinton showed little desire to treat Britain as a close partner and for a time, with his desire to expand trade across the Pacific, even seemed ready to downgrade the Atlantic alliance. Where the 1980s had seen numerous issues on which America and Britain were close, in the 1990s the tendency was towards differences: over the treatment of Vietnamese 'boat people' who sought refuge in Hong Kong, over North Korea's nuclear programme, but most of all over how to deal with the long-running Bosnian war. The Major government was especially irked by US attempts to resolve the sectarian problems in Northern Ireland, and Britain's relevance to Washington declined further with the departure from Hong Kong in 1997. Nonetheless, there were signs that the special relationship – a term that Clinton was ready to use – had been no mere product of the Cold War. There were other, underlying, factors that kept the two together. Both wanted to preserve NATO as a means of safeguarding the American commitment to European security and, despite some differences on specifics, both still wished to build a world economy based on free trade principles. The coming to power of Tony Blair in 1997 also served as a reminder that personal chemistry might yet rekindle old friendships, because he and Clinton were personally close. Blair, like Callaghan before him, also sought a role as a mediator between America and Europe, being deeply committed to European integration but working closely with Washington over Northern Ireland, Iraq and the 1999 Kosovo crisis.[39]

Conclusion

The existence of 'the' (or 'a') special relationship remains the subject of intense debate, touching as it does on such complex issues as belief systems, cultural ties and emotional links. It may have existed during the Second World War, when the two countries were still approximately equal in power and status, fighting closely together, but even then, so far as it was a policy choice, it was more important to London, as a way of dealing with US power, than it was to Washington. Personal ties, as between Churchill and Eisenhower, kept it going into the 1950s, and even after that, the two countries remained allies in the Cold War. The Macmillan government conceived a policy of 'interdependence' by which the US would be led to consult Britain on international questions because of a web of common interests and institutions. Co-operation on nuclear, monetary and intelligence matters was generally close, and here perhaps lay the heart of the 'specialness' in their relations: even if the sterling–dollar link broke down in the 1960s, no other country was supplied with strategic nuclear missiles by the US, intelligence co-operation was extensive, and Britain remained America's 'unsinkable aircraft carrier'. Indeed, co-operation in these fields outlived the Cold War, as did a common commitment to liberal values, both political and economic.

Differences between them on Atlantic defence were usually overcome without grave divisions and, over a wide area, it simply became 'natural' for them to consult one another. Certainly there were some grave differences too, notably on policy towards the Middle East and East Asia, where different approaches to anti-colonialism and Cold War fighting were evident during the Korean War and the Suez crisis. On some questions it could seem that the 'special relationship' was mere fiction.[40] The balance, however, was towards preserving quite close relations thanks to common broad interests (shared liberal values, anti-communism and an interest in stable international economic conditions) and specific, continuing co-operation (especially in financial, defence and intelligence matters), as well as more intangible factors (linguistic ties and feelings of a shared history and culture).

These shifts in the character of relations have been reflected in many detailed studies. As the records have become available, under the rolling barrier of the 30-year rule, so scholars have moved their attention forward from the 1940s, to the 1950s and, currently, to the 1960s. Books on the 1940s and early 1950s overwhelmingly saw a strong partnership. Studies of Suez and later were much more sceptical. By the 1960s Britain was economically weaker and less self-confident as an international power. Analysis of these traits in the 1960s and later has led some historians, such as John Charmley, to question attitudes and policies in the 1940s and 1950s. Was the wartime alliance with America a mistake? In the post-war era was the country over-extending itself? New materials have led not only to new perspectives on similar problems, but also to new areas of study. Two fields in particular have seen impressive and productive work. Writers such as Richard Aldrich have deepened our grasp of the work and influence of intelligence in transatlantic relations. Nicholas Cull, Scott Lucas and Hugh Wilford have explored the cultural dimensions to Anglo-American ties and to their pursuit of Cold War policies.

The 'special relationship' has often appeared to be in terminal decline, as in the Heath–Nixon years, or during the Major–Clinton period. But the dangers of writing it off were highlighted at the start of the new millennium by the joint Anglo-American operation against Iraq in 2003, in which the only other country to send combat troops was another Anglo-Saxon offspring, Australia. However, Raymond Seitz points out an under-noticed danger to the special relationship: the miniaturization of British military forces.[41] Tony Blair's liberal internationalism and propensity to intervene (Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq) would be difficult to sustain with forces as small as those identified by Niall Ferguson.[42] And yet, as a February 1968 State Department memorandum noted, Britain 'had finally resigned itself to being only a European power' but its interests 'still converge with ours more than . . . those of any other ally'. 'The special relationship has been pronounced dead as often as Martin Bormann has been reported alive', the paper said, 'Indeed, perhaps the best evidence that it is still alive is the fact that its detractors feel obliged to re-announce its death every few months.'[43]

NOTES

1 Winston Churchill spoke in 1943 of 'the natural Anglo-American special relationship'; quoted in Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, p. 143.
2 On the war see Reynolds et al., eds, *Allies at War*. For British propaganda during the war, see Brewer, *To Win the Peace*.
3 Two pioneering studies are Anderson, *The United States, Great Britain and the Cold War*, and Hathaway, *The Ambiguous Relationship*. On Bevin, see Bullock, *Ernest Bevin*. On European unity, see Young, *Britain and European Unity, 1945–1992*.
4 See Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations*.
5 On intelligence, see Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand*, and Cradock, *Know Your Enemy*.
6 On financial relations, see Gardner, *Sterling–Dollar Diplomacy*.
7 On cultural ties, see Frost, *The Rich Tide*, and Dimbleby and Reynolds, *Ocean Apart*, pp. 267–86.
8 See e.g. Lucas, *Freedom's War*; Wilford, *The CIA*; and Rawnsley, ed., *Cold War Propaganda*.
9 Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War*, and MacDonald, *Britain and the Korean War*.
10 On the character of British policies in this era, see Lowe, *Containing the Cold War in East Asia*.
11 Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*
12 Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East*.
13 Heiss, *Empire and Nationhood*.
14 On Suez, see Kyle, *Suez*, and Lucas, *Divided We Stand*. For events after Suez, see Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser*.
15 On the 1960s, see Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*.
16 On Franks, see Hopkins, *Oliver Franks*. On Ormsby Gore, see comments in Scott, *Macmillan, Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, and Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*.
17 Dimbleby and Reynolds, *Ocean Apart*, pp. 219–22.
18 Schlesinger, *The Thousand Days*; Sorensen, *Kennedy*.
19 On JFK–Macmillan relations, see Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*.
20 On Skybolt, see Neustadt, *Report to JFK*. On nuclear weapons more generally, see Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations*, and Duke, *US Defence Bases in the United Kingdom*.
21 Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations*, pp. 181–7.

22 Young, *Britain and World Affairs, 1964–70.*
23 Dimbleby and Reynolds, *Ocean Apart*, p. 247.
24 On Douglas-Home, see Thorpe, *Alec Douglas-Home.*
25 For insights into the mixture of affection and animosity towards the American ally, see Reynolds, *Rich Relations*, pp. 36–42, 380–1, 432–9. On American anti-British attitudes, see Moser, *Twisting the Lion's Tail.*
26 Dimbleby and Reynolds, *Ocean Apart*, p. 256.
27 Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century*, p. 138.
28 Brandon, *Special Relationships*, p. 231.
29 Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations*, pp. 156–7.
30 On these issues, see Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*; Young, *The Labour Governments, 1964–70*; and Renwick, *Fighting with Allies.*
31 Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 90–1.
32 Heath, *The Course of My Life*, p. 472.
33 Kissinger singles out the close co-operation between himself and Sir Thomas Brimelow of the Foreign Office: see his *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 278, 281–2.
34 On these issues, see Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*, pp. 76, 103, and Dimbleby and Reynolds, *Ocean Apart*, 264–5 (both on Yom Kippur). See Heath's perspective in *The Course of My Life*, p. 485 (China), pp. 492–3 (on working with Nixon and Kissinger), pp. 500–2 (Yom Kippur).
35 On the IMF crisis see Burk and Cairncross, *'Goodbye Great Britain'.*
36 Smith, *Reagan and Thatcher*. See also their respective memoirs: Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, and Reagan, *My Life.*
37 Freedman, *Britain and the Falklands War*. See also Renwick (at the Washington embassy at the time), *Fighting with Allies*, pp. 225–38.
38 Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*, pp. 95, 97–9 (Westland), pp. 99–102 (Grenada), pp. 102–5 (Libya), pp. 168–72 (Gulf War); Dimbleby and Reynolds, *Ocean Apart*, pp. 316–17 (Grenada), pp. 323–5 (Libya); Renwick, *Fighting with Allies*, pp. 242–5 (Grenada), pp. 249–52 (Libya).
39 For astute comments on Anglo-American relations during Clinton's first administration see the US ambassador's reflections: Seitz, *Over Here*. On the issues, see Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, pp. 290–7.
40 The majority of writers on Anglo-American relations have seen, on balance, some genuine specialness. But, for doubts see Charmley, *Churchill's Grand Alliance*, and Danchev, *On Specialness.*
41 Seitz, *Over Here*, p. 332.
42 In 1997–8 only 6.6 per cent of government expenditure was devoted to defence, the lowest level since the War of the Roses according to Ferguson, *The Cash Nexus*, pp. 46–7.
43 Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri, Philip Kaiser Papers, box 8, research memorandum, 7 Feb. 1968.

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FURTHER READING

For a long-term overview of Anglo-American relations see Howard Temperley, *Britain and America since Independence* (Basingstoke, 2002). There are several good general surveys: C. J. Bartlett, *The ‘Special Relationship’* (1992); Alan Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (1995); and Ritchie Ovendale, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 1998). Robin Renwick, *Fighting with Allies* (1996) is by a distinguished former ambassador. But the best account remains David Dimbleby and David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: The Relationship Between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (1988). John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After* (2001), which combines chronological and thematic analysis to good effect, concentrates on developments since 1960. A thoughtful and penetrating study, principally of the foreign policy elites rather than of relations generally, is D. C. Watt, *Succeeding John Bull* (Cambridge, 1984). There are some excellent essays in Wm. Roger Louis and Hedley Bull, eds, *The ‘Special Relationship’: Anglo-American Relations Since 1945* (Oxford, 1986).

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