



**SIR MAX HASTINGS**

**DEFENDING THE 'ESSENTIAL RELATIONSHIP':**

**BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES**

**THE 2011 RUTTENBERG LECTURE**

David Cameron and Barack Obama said in a joint statement at the end of the president's recent state visit to London that the relationship between our two countries is not merely special, but essential. This was a pleasantly emollient assertion, characteristic of the things statesmen say in such circumstances. But this evening I want to discuss how far it seems justified by realities, past and present, with special reference to defence, which is my own field; and what we, the British, as ever the lesser player and often suppliant, might do to strengthen our side of the affiliation. I use the word affiliation, rather than partnership, advisedly, for it seems to me that many of the difficulties and disappointments that landmark our exchanges with the United States result from exaggerated hopes of what Britain may realistically expect from its relationship with the most powerful nation on earth.

Our two countries have some cultural affinities, if rather fewer than a generation ago, and individual British and American people often like each other very much. As an Englishman, I can aspire to a degree of intimacy with American friends that is hard to match with those of some other nations. But one of the commonest errors of the British, including sometimes their prime ministers, is to imagine that Americans collectively are like us. They are not. Most are no longer Eurocentric. Tens of millions are Latinos, more than a few of whom scarcely speak English. Newer and younger Americans' view of their own society, and of the world, is very different from ours. They have a sense of their own greatness, of their continent which holds so much that it seems unnecessary to look much or often beyond it, such as Britain perforce abandoned long ago. To be sure, the rise of China has brought upon the US, and especially its president, a new caution about the limits of the possible, and apprehension about the economic future, which were hard to imagine 30 years ago. But today America is still the world's sole superpower; as



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Professor Sir Michael Howard puts it 'the only nation able and sometimes willing to get things done'.

One of the first and hardest lessons for some British people to grasp, even those at the heart of government, is how little attention we command among most Americans, unless there chances to be a royal wedding. Michael Howard is the repository of much wisdom on matters historical and strategic. I have always been struck by something he wrote years ago about the Anglo-American wartime alliance, a period when he was a fighting soldier:

"It is never very easy for the British to understand that a very large number of Americans, if they think about us at all, do so with various degrees of dislike and contempt...In the 1940s the Americans had some reason to regard the British as a lot of toffee-nosed bastards who oppressed half the world and had a sinister talent for getting other people to do their fighting for them."

In comprehending the wartime era, customarily cited as that in which the so-called special relationship was created, it is important to recognise how much mistrust and even antipathy persisted between the two peoples.

I will say more about this later, but for now it suffices to suggest that if most Americans are today much less wary of Britain than they were in our imperialist era, it is because we do not loom so large, and thus they think about us less. That also applies in the White House and on Capital Hill: Britain scarcely registers on the consciousness of any but a handful of congressmen and senators, save as a theme park for agreeable vacations. A British ambassador in Washington said to me some years ago: 'One of my jobs is to break to every British minister who visits here the unwelcome news that, no, they won't be appearing on the Today show or with Barbara Walters'.



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But British governments care to the point of obsession about the United States, and its administrations' view of us, because many things which we want can happen only with American acquiescence or support. Whenever scepticism is expressed about Anglo-American relations, prime ministers respond with some pride and indeed complacency that if anything important happens in the world, one of the few personal phone calls most US presidents make is to the tenant of Downing Street. This was so most recently, between Barack Obama and David Cameron following the killing of Osama bin Laden. One of the prime minister's staff says:

"China may have become the second most important country on earth, but that does not mean the President gets first on the line to president Hu, or for that matter prime minister Putin. He wants to talk to someone he knows is on his side – and that is most likely to mean us."

This is so. If few American chief executives share real intimacy with other national leaders, it seems fair to speculate that Barack Obama feels as comfortable with David Cameron as with any foreign statesman with whom he does business. The president knows that Cameron and his government are both instinctively and fundamentally in the same camp. We want America and its rulers to prosper and to get their way in the world, as the Chinese and Russians frankly do not. But successive British prime ministers since 1941 have exposed themselves to rebuff and even humiliation when they aspired to something beyond a comfortable accommodation on specifics, seeking to influence the policies of the United States and its leadership in directions they are disinclined to take. The British and US governments often find themselves on the same side. But when days come, as they do, on which America, and especially the Congress, wants something that runs against British wishes, it is dismaying to modern prime ministers, as it was to Winston Churchill, how seldom London's view prevails.



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The attitude of the British public towards the US is more equivocal than that of most of their politicians. There have always been strands of economic envy and cultural condescension, periodically manifested in outbreaks of anti-Americanism. Such a surge took place at the height of the Ulster troubles, when some Americans and even their government seemed remarkably indulgent towards Irish Republicanism. There was tension before the 1982 Falklands conflict, when secretary of state Alexander Haig appeared alarmingly sympathetic to the Argentine case, and nothing was known by the public about Defense Secretary Cap Weinburger's critical assistance to British war-making.

More recently, substantial damage was done by Iraq. Many British people were angered that Tony Blair allowed Britain to become a party to George W Bush's invasion, undertaken on what proved a false pretext. Moreover, American gratitude for British support, or even awareness of our participation, was muted. Among scores of American-authored books on the Iraq war published since 2003, scarcely any mentions British involvement in more than a few paragraphs or even sentences.

The US security community has a high opinion of Britain's intelligence services, especially GCHQ, and enjoys a relationship with them entirely unique between America and other nations, which today forms the strongest single transatlantic link. By contrast, we sometimes flatter ourselves about American regard for our armed forces. These have shrunk very small. General Sir Mike Jackson, then head of the British Army, said to me back in the autumn of 2002, after a visit to Washington in the run-up to the Iraq invasion:

"Mass matters – and we don't have it".

The US Marine Corps' air wing is larger than the entire Royal Air Force.



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A senior British officer asserted optimistically a couple of years ago: 'The Americans may not hold the British Army in very high regard just now, but they are hugely grateful for what our special forces are doing in Baghdad'. This was a reference to the SAS's targeted assaults on Al Qaeda leaders. But the next time I was in Washington, I mentioned the general's remark to seven or eight Americans in the defence loop. Only one was aware of what the SAS had been doing. Of course Gen.David Petraeus and his close colleagues knew. But here was another example of the way in which the British may, in our own eyes, play a prominent role in an alliance military operation, but awareness of this amid the vastness of the United States, and even in its corridors of power, remains slight. Moreover, we should not fool ourselves that the US Army thinks highly of our performance in Basra or, until recently, our showing in Afghanistan's Helmand province, because it does not.

The question in all alliances, and especially the Atlantic one, is always the same: what do respective nations bring to the party? Outgoing US defense secretary Robert Gates made an important and impressive speech in Brussels last month, in which he pulled no punches in expressions of dismay and indeed scorn for the uneven fashion in which the western powers' defence costs are distributed.

"The growing difficulty for the US', he said, 'is to sustain current support for NATO if the American taxpayer continues to carry most of the burden."

Between 2001 and 2010, US defence expenditure rose from \$305 to \$693 billion, while that of the UK grew from \$35 to just \$56 billion. France pays \$42 billion for defence, Germany 41 and Italy 20. The 2009 statistics, which have not changed much since, showed the US spending 4.68% of GDP on defence or \$2,153 per capita. Britain managed only 2.71%, or \$965 per capita – and falling; France spent 2.05% or \$870 per capita; Germany 1.2% or \$580 per capita.



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Mr. Gates drew attention to the feeble showing in Afghanistan of some nations which grudgingly sent troops, but not to fight. He spoke of:

“National caveats that tied the hands of allied commanders in sometimes infuriating ways, the inability of many allies to meet agreed commitments...NATO has struggled, at times desperately, to sustain a deployment of 25-40,000 troops, not just in boots on the ground, but in crucial support assets such as helicopters, transport aircraft, maintenance, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and much more.”

In Libya, said the defense secretary:

“Similar shortcomings – in capability and will – have the potential to jeopardize the...campaign....While every alliance member voted for the Libya mission, less than half have participated at all, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in the strike mission...The mightiest military alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly-armed regime in a sparsely populated country – yet many allies are beginning to run short of munitions, requiring the US, once more, to make up the difference.”

Some British people will here interject, ‘ah, but Bob Gates was not directing his fire at us. We have been doing our part manfully – it is the Germans and Italians and suchlike who were in his sights’. Do not be so sure. If Britain’s contribution and capabilities are indeed larger than those of other European nations, in Libya as in Iraq and Afghanistan our operations are viable only with US support. Senior Americans I know are appalled by our planned defence cuts. They know that, if the British Army shrinks as scheduled after withdrawal from Afghanistan, we shall thereafter be able to deploy only a single brigade group of 7-8,000 men for



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sustained operations overseas. This is not an impressive force, to put it politely, for a nation that prides itself on its military skills and warrior prowess.

In making a broader judgement about Anglo-American relations, it seems useful to think carefully about just what allies are. It is unheard-of in history for two sovereign nations to achieve concord across the whole range of policy. Countries become allies because they discover one, and occasionally a few more, objectives in common. Almost always, this includes a shared enemy. Marlborough in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century led British and Dutch forces against the French, as did Wellington British, Spanish and Portuguese troops a hundred years later. Such relationships have always been highly fractious.

I am a student of the Second World War. The extravagant rhetoric of Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill about the Grand Alliance causes some historians even to this day wildly to overstate the harmony and intimacy of their relationship. They are sometimes described as friends. This seems mistaken: they created a friendship of state, something quite different. By 1944-45 the British, and Churchill in particular, had become privately angry and bitter at what they perceived as intolerably overbearing American behaviour towards themselves. I will quote an example of just how tough Washington could be.

In December 1944, there was hunger verging upon starvation in Italy and indeed all Europe. A British embassy official in Washington visited Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy to protest against the policy of monopolising precious shipping to transport fantastically extravagant quantities of supplies to US forces overseas, while liberated civilians were in desperate straits. 'In order to win the war', the British visitor demanded of McCloy, 'were we not imperilling the political and social fabric of European civilization on which the future peace of the world depended?' His subsequent memo to the Foreign Office records:



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"This drew from Mr. McCloy the immediate rejoinder that it was a British interest to remember that, as a result of the complete change in the economic and financial position of the British Commonwealth which the war had brought about, we, in the U.K., depended at least as much upon the U.S. as we did upon Europe. Was it wise to risk losing the support of the U.S. in seeking the support of Western Europe? This was what was involved."

The shocked British official persisted in pressing the case for feeding Europe's civilians. McCloy, too, stuck to his guns. He asserted that it would be fatal for Britain 'to argue that the war in the Pacific should be retarded in order that the civilian population of Europe should be fed'. The Foreign Office in London professed acute dismay on reading the record of this meeting. But British impotence in the face of U.S. dominance remained inescapable.

That is only one example of the sort of exchanges which took place between the two allied capitals in the latter part of the war, supposedly a halcyon era of Anglo-American relations. The Americans were in the driving seat. They knew it, and were determined to impose their will. Brigadier Vivian Dykes of the British Military Mission in Washington wrote home: 'We simply hold no cards at all, but London expects us to work miracles. It is a hard life'. Curiously enough, at that time the US adopted a more indulgent attitude to the third party in the alliance, the Soviet Union. Until his death, Roosevelt harboured delusions about the working relationship that might be possible with Stalin, such as Churchill abandoned years earlier.

One reason Stalin became the most successful warlord of World War II was that he understood with icy clarity something that often eluded the Americans and British. The three allied powers were conjoined to defeat the common enemy of Nazism; but this in no way altered the fact that on almost everything else, their purposes were at odds. This applied also, if in lesser degree, between Britain and the US. In 1940-41, before America became a belligerent, Washington insisted on payment of





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cash on the nail for every ton of arms and supplies shipped across the Atlantic, until the British had exhausted their entire gold holdings and foreign investment portfolio, some of which had to be sold to US companies at firesale prices. Churchill was appalled by this, and wrote to Roosevelt on 7 December 1940, saying that if the cash drain continued, his nation would find itself in a position in which 'after the victory was won with our blood and sweat, and civilization saved and the time gained for the US to be fully armed against all eventualities, we should stand stripped to the bone. Such a course would not be in the moral or economic interests of either of our countries'.

Roosevelt never responded to this point, and his evasion seems highly significant. The president identified a powerful US interest in Britain's continued resistance, and displayed extraordinary energy and imagination to make public and congressional opinion recognise this; but not in Britain's post-war solvency. American policy throughout the war emphasised the importance of strengthening the US postwar competitive trading position vis-à-vis its ally, and indeed the terms of Lend-Lease imposed harsh constraints on – for instance – British civil aviation. The US was unflinching in shaping policy to do as little as possible to assist the preservation of the British Empire, a purpose which it deplored, with special emphasis on India. Growing awareness of this caused Churchill much dismay, though his belief never wavered that fostering the American alliance was a core purpose to which all else must be subordinated.

He was assuredly right. An important element in the greatness of his wartime leadership was his understanding of the supreme importance of embracing the United States, in contrast to the stunning condescension displayed by most of his contemporaries among the British ruling caste. Compare Churchill's wisdom with the remark of Lord Halifax, who became Britain's Washington ambassador in December 1940: 'I have never liked Americans, except odd ones. In the mass I have always found them dreadful'. Lord Linlithgow, then Viceroy of India, wrote to Halifax



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to commiserate with him on his posting: 'The heavy labour of toadying to your pack of pole-squatting parvenus ! What a country, and what savages those who inhabit it!'

As for popular sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic, a not untypical poll in July 1942 invited Americans to say which nation they thought was trying hardest to win the war. A loyal 37% answered, the US; 30% named Russia, 14% China, 13% offered no opinion. Just 6% identified the British as most convincing triers. Conversely, a 1942 Gallup Poll asked British people which ally was making the greatest contribution. Some 50% answered 'Russia'; 43% 'Britain'; 5% 'China'; and just 3% 'the United States'. In their hearts, British people knew that they could accomplish little alone, that only American resources were making possible Axis defeat. But it was sometimes hard to feel gratitude, amid British consciousness that the struggle was reducing their own nation to penury, while America grew relentlessly in wealth and might.

Now, my point in all this is emphatically not to suggest that the wartime Anglo-American relationship was a sham or a failure. On the contrary, at an operational level it proved the most successful military alliance in history. Professor Harry Nicholas has written that what was attained was 'a much higher degree of cooperation and unforced fusion than had ever before existed between two sovereign states'. It is merely that we are foolish to idealise it, to fail to recognise that it rested, and always will, not upon sentiment but upon perceptions of respective national interest. It represented a partnership committed to a certain purpose – in the 1940s, defeat of the Axis – rather than a marriage of minds between peoples or governments, such as never could and never can be attainable. With the coming of the Cold War after 1945, the same remained true. The United States and Britain became the foremost players in the NATO alliance, a huge success story in shielding Western Europe against the Soviet Union. Close military and intelligence collaboration was superbly sustained through more than



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40 years, and the latter especially continues to the present day. But meanwhile, on many other bilateral issues tensions and differences persisted between Washington and London, as they must. What matters, to justify the continuance of this like any other alliance, is to identify a relatively narrow range of big things about which the two countries can agree, acknowledging that on many others, they will not. This seems as true in 2011 as it was in 1945.

The phrase 'special relationship' always seems a rather pathetic British conceit, which American presidents indulge as a courtesy, knowing that some of our politicians attribute to it totemic significance. It implies that we hope, or even expect, to receive breaks from Washington which other nations do not. Yet only in very rare cases does anglophilia influence US behaviour. A conspicuous example was the military assistance rendered to Britain during the Falklands war, thanks to the personal enthusiasm of Caspar Weinberger, when much of the Reagan administration was sceptical about or even hostile to British purposes.

In the normal course of business between the two nations, even if a president feels disposed to act helpfully towards some British interest, Congress and the rambling diversity of US government can remain stubbornly unaccommodating. A senior member of the Foreign Office said to me in some exasperation late in 2003: 'we have stuck out our necks a long way to support the United States in Iraq. This makes it pretty irksome that today, when there are twelve or fifteen important bilateral issues under negotiation between Britain and the US, on not one is the Administration helping us out'.

This should not be a source of surprise, though it always seems so in Downing Street. Tony Blair was naïve in believing that, by joining George Bush's invasion of Iraq, he would gain leverage not only upon that operation, but also in inducing the Administration to exert more pressure on Israel for concessions to the Palestinians. The rule of the game, surely, is that Britain should wholeheartedly enter harness



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with the US in furtherance of any issue, operation or purpose which seems deserving of support. But it is woefully mistaken to join an American enterprise or back a US policy against British instincts or interests merely in hopes of gratitude or payback from Washington elsewhere, because this is unlikely to be forthcoming. Perhaps the wisest action of Harold Wilson's otherwise undistinguished premiership was his refusal, in the face of immense American pressure, to commit British troops in Vietnam.

It would seem rash to suggest that the most recent shared Anglo-American military operations, in Iraq and Afghanistan, have been an unqualified success. This is not the place to discuss either in detail. But I suspect history will judge that in Afghanistan, having started by doing the right thing in evicting Al Qaeda, we have ended up fighting the wrong war, without much advancing either the struggle against international terrorism, or the vast and intractable challenge of stabilizing Pakistan.

A while ago, I heard a then-defence secretary argue that the Iraq and Afghan interventions have been so unpopular here that they rendered it unlikely a British government could for years reconcile the electorate to another military adventure abroad. Libya suggests that he is wrong, though it is by no means assured that story will be concluded without tears before bedtime.

And whatever happens there, and whatever the personal instincts and inclinations of presidents and prime ministers, it seems overwhelmingly likely the Western powers will again find themselves obliged to deploy forces abroad because, as Charles Guthrie so sensibly observes, 'something always happens', and usually of a kind which – like Libya – nobody had previously thought of.

The one certainty in Anglo-American relations is that if we wish to play our traditional role abroad in pursuit of any perceived important Western foreign policy



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objective, to enjoy America's confidence and share its secrets, we must own armed forces and intelligence assets capable of earning these things. If the European project had evolved as its founders hoped, long before today's date a degree of defence integration would have been achieved which would have provided this continent with formidable, flexible and widely-capable armed forces. As it is, not only do such forces not exist, but there seems no likelihood of their doing so in the future.

NATO secretary-general Anders Rasmussen said in an important recent speech that the global order:

“...has more stakeholders than ever before, and yet very few guarantors. Europe is still one of them, but for how long?... Although defence is and must remain the prerogative of sovereign powers, an alliance that brings Europe and North America together requires an equitable sharing of the burden in order to be efficient... At the current pace of cuts, it is hard to see Europe could maintain enough military capabilities to sustain similar operations [to Libya] in the future.”

Since the end of the Cold War, while the GDP of the European NATO nations has grown by around 55%, their defence spending has fallen by almost 20%. Meanwhile in Asia, Indian defence spending has risen by 59% and China's has tripled. In 1991, NATO's European partners contributed one-third of the alliance's combined defence spend, while the US and Canada contributed the rest. Today, Europe's share has fallen to a pathetic 21%.

It is not so much that most European countries have the wrong security policies; rather, they have none at all. They address the issue with the Panglossian hope that if they do not take up arms against anybody else, with luck no one will do so against them. The enfeebled condition of Europe's defences will be extraordinarily



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hard to remedy. It takes years, even if political will exists, significantly to expand a nation's armaments. It is impossible at short notice, and in the face of unexpected crisis, rapidly to reinforce. Every power is obliged to take the field with what men, planes and guns it has on the day. And such strength, in the case of Europe and indeed Britain, is not impressive.

'Hard power can enable peace', says Anders Rasmussen. Yet he also acknowledges that in the current economic environment, increased defence spending is unlikely. His own solution to Europe's resource shortfall is that its nations should co-operate much more closely on procurement, so that through a rational distribution of capabilities, the continent becomes capable of deploying credible forces. Yet for decades this objective has foundered on the rocks of rival domestic interests, and frank absence of will in many European societies.

No responsible British government could today make an agreement whereby its European partners would become responsible for, say, airborne surveillance or unmanned drone combat capability in a future deployment, because the risk is far too great that on the day, and for whatever reason, the others simply would not be there. It must be right to pursue shared procurement and manufacturing wherever possible. But France is the only major European power with which the British can plan jointly for future war-fighting contingencies with a reasonable expectation of commitments being fulfilled. Our two nations are the only ones which might be able to maintain armed forces capable of convincing Washington that Europeans can make a meaningful contribution to our common defence. This may be monstrously unfair to British and French taxpayers, but it is the way things are. If we want the US to sustain a military commitment to Europe, the British together with the French must accept a disproportionate share of the burden, because there is nobody much else and that is that.



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'The British', growled Henry Kissinger a few years ago, 'are the last people left in Europe who like to fight'. If this is not quite true, it is certainly the case that, when we put our minds to it and commit the necessary resources, we can fight better than any other modern European nation. That superb US ambassador in London Ray Seitz observed twenty years ago that Britain was very foolish to cut its armed forces, as did the then-Tory government, because these continued to command high respect, and were the one asset which made possible what every prime minister yearns for his country to do – punch above its weight.

Britain always has a choice about whether to be a player on the global stage. It is perfectly possible for us to carry on our national business with the relative passivity on supra-national strategic issues of Germany or Italy. But every British government in modern times has opted for a major role abroad, and Libya suggests that David Cameron intends to continue the tradition. Indeed, he has shown himself determined to exercise a leadership role there which the US declines, and which many American policy-makers, in and out of uniform, regard as an unwelcome diversion from their own national strategic priorities.

Yet what seems to some of us remarkable is that our governments still demand power-projection, while being unwilling to fund armed forces of an adequacy which alone can give effect to our pretensions. Few modern politicians like defence. They know the electorate is not much interested, save at the crudest level of battlefield heroics. A century ago, during the great controversy about how many new dreadnought battleships should be built, every middle-class household in Britain understood – even if not all sympathised with – the slogan 'we want eight and we won't wait'. Today, debate about whether this country should build new aircraft-carriers or buy Joint Strike Fighters has been conducted within a tiny defence constituency, and commands negligible understanding or interest in the country, the media and parliament.



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The Ministry of Defence has an unenviable reputation for waste and incompetence on a scale that costs billions. Some service chiefs have crippled their credibility by pursuing big-ticket programmes which cost hugely, but add disproportionately less to our usable forces. There is a respectable, though by no means conclusive case for replacing the Trident nuclear deterrent. But I am highly sceptical about doing so on a like-for-like basis, because it seems almost certain that the price of doing so will be further to weaken our conventional capabilities, since the government is adamant that such a programme's costs must be borne without increasing the overall national defence spend. This is certainly the view of RUSI researchers and other expert witnesses.

All these things add up to a woeful failure, spanning decades, to adopt a credible national strategy, to which last year's Strategic Defence and Security Review added another ignominious contribution. The problem is unchanging: paper commitments are preserved, while resources to fulfil them are slashed merely to accommodate the latest in successive budget crises.

Today, Britain's armed forces are almost threadbare – not, it is true, by the standards of our European partners, but by those of preserving the capability to make a contribution to an allied deployment overseas appropriate to this country's size, aspirations and yes, wealth. If the prime minister is serious in wishing the United States to perceive our bilateral relationship as 'essential', then during the years ahead it will be indispensable to find cash to do more, not less. If present plans go ahead substantially to cut the size of the army, this objective will be compromised, arguably fatally. If, today, it is a source of dismay to Washington that Britain is spending little more than a meagre 2% of its GDP on defence, in the years ahead it seems likely that a big political fight will be necessary, to sustain even that figure.





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In the newspaper industry we have a cynical saying, that a journalist is as good as their last story. In international relations, an ally is worth as much as, and no more than, the resources and specifically military resources it is capable of contributing towards implementing a shared purpose by force or the threat of it. Robin Renwick was surely right when he wrote 15 years ago of the vital task Britain can fulfil, 'to help ensure that the US is not left alone to respond to crises in which the interests of the West generally are engaged'. Yet as Robert Gates says:

"If current trends in the decline of European defense capabilities are not halted and reversed, future US political leaders...may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost."

In conclusion, I return to my earlier remark about the folly of seeking to inject sentiment, as distinct from warm and proper courtesy, into Anglo-American diplomacy, because this is a formula for disappointment. As in the past, so in the future our friendship will command as much respect in Washington as our standing as a nation in the world deserves – political, economic and military. It is the responsibility of the British people, as well as of their government, to ensure that we earn this through the twenty-first century, recognising that it will not come as of right or out of admiration for the colour of our eyes.