



Policy Study No 137

America and Britain

Is the relationship still special?

Anthony Hartley



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Introduction

To speak of a 'special' relationship between Britain and the United States is to embark on a delicate task of definition. Recently this description of the Anglo-American relationship has become a subject of controversy and, as in any polemic, its original content obscured and confused. For many years the phrase had a distinctly flattering implication for the British end of the axis. A 'special' relationship seemed to mean a *privileged* relationship, a particular access to confidence and friendship. It conjured up visions of a sage Britain counselling the less experienced United States about its rôle in world affairs. Harold Macmillan, in one of his not entirely serious epigrams, saw the British as the Greeks of a new Roman Empire. He himself certainly achieved something of that position during the Kennedy administration through what became a genuine friendship with the President. Whether Kennedy listened to his advice or not – and, no doubt, it was usually couched in rather allusive terms – a close personal relationship existed. It existed too, reinforced by a common political philosophy, between Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and had done so, with less certainty, between Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. During the period between 1939 and 1990 no other non-American statesman achieved this kind of personal rapport with an American President. Before 1939 no British Prime Minister did so either – certainly not Lloyd George with Woodrow Wilson.

Moreover, during the same period, American leaders were prepared to address Britain in the authentic tones of the candid friend, rather differently from the way in which they spoke to other countries. Dean Acheson's famous remark that Britain had lost an empire but not found a rôle, went far beyond the ordinary admonitions of diplomacy. Such language would hardly have been used to the sensitive de Gaulle or Adenauer. It was American policy that Britain should join the newly inaugurated European Community, and the words in which this was conveyed suggested those of a paterfamilias rebuking some scapegrace member of the family.

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Here, indeed, Acheson played the stern Roman to Britain's diminished Greeks.

In 1993 there is a distinct tendency in Britain itself to brush aside any talk of a 'special' relationship with the United States as a hangover from World War II, a myth having little real substance and possessing no claim to be treated as a national asset. There are evident reasons for this. There has been an obvious decline in Britain's power in the world, a decline marked by relative industrial failure. This has been thrown into relief by the ending of the Soviet threat in Western Europe – a development that has led to countries being judged, less by their military, than by their economic strength. As long as that threat existed Britain was thought of as a principal pillar of the North Atlantic Alliance; once it had faded it appeared as a country with structural economic problems, diminished in comparison with France and Germany. It is too soon to say whether the recent improvement in British economic performance and the emergence of structural problems in the French and German economies will modify that perception. On the advent of the Bush administration, the State Department, taking a rather *simpliste* view of the European balance of power, let it be known that a reunited Germany would be its major partner in Europe. Disappointment followed when Germany failed to provide contingents for the Gulf War, in which Britain played its usual rôle of faithful ally. Nevertheless, for Americans, Britain did not usually have such relevance to the world policies of the United States.

Moreover, in some British political circles it was considered that the Anglo-American relationship could be positively harmful in so far as it diverted Britain from its natural destiny in the European Community, a view which coincided with that of State Department 'Atlanticists'. British 'Europeans' were troubled by those publicity-surrounded flights to Washington in which most British Prime Ministers have indulged since 1945. It seemed to them that the European substance was being abandoned for the American shadow. Meetings between President and Prime Minister were no substitute for those more practical, if confused, 'summits' at which the future of Europe was to be decided.¹ This line of argument was reinforced by dislike of Mrs Thatcher, whose numerous critics and enemies – not least those in her own party – found it necessary to disbelieve in the utility of her ties with President Reagan. Since she

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was prepared to base her foreign policy on the Anglo-American relationship, opponents felt themselves bound to denigrate its quality and relevance.

This willingness to play down the importance of a link which once formed the foundation of Britain's foreign policy consensus, invites a reconsideration of the reality behind the 'special relationship'. It should surely be possible to define Anglo-American relations without laying claim to undue British influence in Washington. Nor, when it is a question of the changing nature of America's links with Europe, can it be ignored that the future of the European Community has also become problematical, following the termination of the Cold War from which it took its inception. Moreover, any discussion of the subject cannot leave out the general impact of the United States on Western Europe and, in particular, Britain. Essential to any consideration of the subject is the fact that Britain and the United States have an effect on each other which is far wider than any momentary political influence. With this is involved the gradual influence of American models on British society over the years – a change which is also spreading to the rest of Europe, most obviously in its demotic form. Of course, it may be that what Europeans term 'Americanisation' is simply the effect of advanced economic structures on social and cultural conditions – effects that were gestated in the United States and have made themselves felt in other countries. Over the last 20 years of its history, Britain has certainly moved closer to an American model which could be described as social, but not economic, egalitarianism. Moreover, world economic alignments and the logic of the gradual erosion of trade barriers through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) seem to point to a rapprochement between the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) and Europe which could end in the creation of a wider free trade area.

Given such possibilities, it is timely to reconsider relations between Britain and the United States. This country is uneasily placed in the world today, belonging to the newly created European Union, but drawn towards, and influenced by, the Atlantic world. In the heat of the Maastricht controversy it may have been a tempting simplification to write off the recently prized links with the United States as so many mechanisms of self-deception. Yet it is not unreasonable to ask whether we are compelled to accept this

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Europe versus America approach to our national future. Perhaps, since we cannot change the geography or the history of the British Isles, it would be as well if we could simply accept these competing determinations of our place in world affairs, regarding them as a strength rather than a weakness. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that value to the US derives from our position in Europe while on significant occasions our value to our European neighbours has stemmed from a close rapport with the United States, especially at moments of crises.

1

The seeds of friendship

The history of Anglo-American relations during the 19th and 20th centuries is one of what now seems a natural development, but also of a surprising reversal of attitudes. Up to the end of the 19th century it can be described in the terms used in the index of a history of continental expansion: 'British, machinations of.'² Up to and well past the American Civil War the atmosphere was one of mutual suspicion, and British sympathies for the Confederacy did nothing to improve it. 'Everyone,' wrote Henry Adams, 'waited to see Lincoln and his hirelings disappear on one vast débâcle. All conceived that the Washington government would soon crumble, and that Minister Adams would vanish with the rest.'³ Yet, a few years later, General Grant, commenting on these difficulties, could add: 'England and the United States are natural allies, and should be the best of friends.'⁴ A decade after the publication of Grant's *Memoirs* in 1885-86, Britain was already beginning to be seen as the United States' potential ally in Europe – 'a fortified outpost of the Anglo-Saxon race', in the words of Henry Adams's brother Brooks.⁵ Meanwhile, it had become a principle of British foreign policy that the United States was 'the one Power with whom the prospect of war or antagonistic engagements would not be entertained'.⁶ In the first decade of the 20th century a growing number of American strategists and writers on international affairs, led by Alfred Mahan, perceived the service rendered to the security of the United States by the British fleet and also the threat to the European balance of power from the ambitions of Imperial Germany. Britain had been the prop of that balance but was now a 'weary Titan' whose exhaustion might require the United States to assume its stabilising rôle. Theodore Roosevelt, who came to treat war with Britain as 'out of the question', despite earlier anti-British rhetoric, went so far as to state that if Britain were unable to defend the balance of power, the United States would have to do so.⁷ This, in effect, was what occurred during World War I and World War II; it became explicit in President Truman's assumption of British responsibilities

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in Greece and Turkey in 1947. During the two world conflicts, Britain was a major ally of the United States and, after 1945 the principal participant in an American security system designed to defend Western Europe from a perceived Soviet military threat.

This change from 19th century suspicion to 20th century friendship might seem a surprising historical development. But it has to be remembered that, up to the Spanish-American War in 1898, Britain was almost the only country in Europe with which the United States had continuous political relations. It was certainly the country which American statesmen and diplomats knew best. It was, therefore, not surprising that when the United States emerged as an active player on the world scene, its preference should have gone to Britain as an ally compared with, say, an authoritarian Imperial Germany or Tsarist Russia. A growing American conviction of German aggressive intentions, first under Wilhelm II and then under Adolf Hitler, almost inevitably made of the United States a willing associate and ally of Britain against the anti-democratic forces let loose in Europe. Here realism and idealism pulled the same way in the formation of American foreign policy.

After 1945 Britain, weakened in political power and economically debilitated, played its part as the trusted ally of the United States. Only two British Prime Ministers – Anthony Eden and Edward Heath – can be described as ‘anti-American’; and their period of office was short. Throughout the Cold War Britain was an enthusiastic supporter of the Atlantic alliance, a supra-national military pact, whose war plans effectively placed decisions concerning war and peace in American hands since, in a dangerous crisis, there would hardly have been time to consult national governments, let alone national parliaments. In fact, membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) involved a considerable surrender of sovereignty, though this remained implicit. In Britain there were few objections to this. British political opinion was more ready to resign its freedom of action to the United States than it was to be later to the collective decision-making of the EEC.

Britain, moreover, unquestionably enjoyed an advantageous position in NATO. There were special Anglo-American arrangements concerning nuclear weapons and technology, the British nuclear deterrent being kept in existence by Washington’s willingness to provide Polaris and Trident. There was co-operation in the

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gathering and interpretation of intelligence, of a range and depth which did not exist between other NATO allies. There were regular inter-governmental meetings and consultations on a wide variety of topics. A trip to Washington was held to be one of the first duties of a new British Prime Minister, an electorally profitable operation, though few voters paused to ask what he did when he got there. Much of this closeness was left over from the wartime relationship, but much too served a useful purpose from the point of view of Washington as well as London – as when, for instance, after the collapse of the European Defence Community (EDC), Eden's diplomacy succeeded in devising a scheme which provided for the rearmament of the German Federal Republic (BRD) and its entry into NATO and Western European Union (WEU).

This short account of Anglo-American relations certainly justifies the use of the term 'special'. Even leaving out of account those periods of close personal ties between American and British leaders, no other country can show quite the same quality of historic relationship with the United States as Britain. Relations with the Soviet Union came to be important for Washington, but this was an adversarial link, based on the need to limit conflict between the two Super-powers. The Anglo-American relationship was 'special' in the sense that it was paralleled by no similar association between the United States and any other European country. It has been specific in quality and this should be recognised, provided that such recognition does not include a belief in the invariable possibility of one country being able to exercise influence on the other at any given moment or in any particular matter of policy.

No less remarkable than the historical depth of Anglo-American relations is their extension in terms of the areas of social activity they cover. From cultural to economic ties, from legal similarities to the impact of political behaviour expressed in international relations, there is scarcely any area of human activity where some reciprocal influence is not perceptible.

2

Cultural exchange

In the cultural field this hardly needs arguing. At present the United States through films, television programmes, but also through books, art and popular music, is by far the greatest cultural influence on Britain. American music and art, of course, exercise a world-wide influence. On a domestic level, so do American food, furniture and clothes. But British permeability to American cultural influence is *sui generis* and stems from the lack of any serious language barrier. The mass media have accustomed us to each other's linguistic variations, and British journalists can now be summoned to the United States to run American publications with what is thought to be their superior editorial skills. Most important, works of fiction, history, philosophy, social science and politics are published simultaneously in both countries. A bookshop in Washington or New York looks very much like one in London or Edinburgh in terms of what is on sale. With the lifting of British exchange controls, the United States became accessible to British tourists, as Britain had always been to their American counterparts. More and more British visitors are becoming familiar with the advantages of the United States – and also with its dangers.

This process of cultural symbiosis differs according to the level on which it occurs. The mass cultural impact, most notably achieved by Hollywood, might seem to be one-way. The vitality of American mass entertainment may have enabled it to overcome its British rivals, but, as a result, it finds itself in competition with British productions that emerge from American-style moulds. A musical like 'Jesus Christ, Superstar', for instance, is a British answer to Broadway but largely couched in American language and style. If 'Dallas' or 'Dynasty' were popular programmes for many Britons who had never seen Texas or California, the superiority of British broadcasting is widely remarked in the United States. In fact, both countries now face the same problem of media multiplied by technology to offer choices that are really no choice at all. This is not so much a matter of imitating Hollywood (or Hollywood's suc-

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cessors) to death, as of media that have become international and are losing their pristine vigour in the search for markets in which success is most safely assured by adhering to stereotypes. Thus, while the British film leads a precarious existence, the American film prospers but is becoming less and less distinctively American. Compare John Ford's Westerns with their feeble 'spaghetti Western' successors.

However, it is in élite culture that more specifically identifiable influences pass from country to country. A book like *Losing Ground* (1984) in which Charles Murray analysed the failure of 'poverty programmes' in the United States, became a text which influenced would-be reformers of the British welfare state. 'Free market' think-tanks in Britain had their contributions taken up by conservatives in America. Paul Kennedy, an English historian working in America, wrote his *Fall of Great Powers* as an object lesson for the United States, where it quickly became a best-seller, but its lesson and the emotional impact of its writing were gathered from British experience. Tom Wolfe's 'new journalism', which changed the nature of newspaper writing in Britain, is another complex instance, since it is now Britain that exports journalistic techniques to the United States. These examples are taken at random, but they are enough to show that, on a fairly sophisticated intellectual level, there is a working dialectic between the two shores of the Atlantic as exported ideas or styles are adopted, modified and returned in a different form.

Of course, such an exchange of ideas is not confined to that between America and Britain. Even Umberto Eco's more obscure books have found a ready sale in the United States, and Lévi-Strauss influenced the whole 'ethnic' debate when it began in the Sixties. In the 19th century British writers dominated the literary scene as suppliers of 'high' culture to America. Despite the excellence of American 19th century writing, this was something of a cultural hegemony rather than an exchange. Certainly there was nothing like such a dynamic process as now exists, though it would be hard now to equal the enthusiasm of the New York crowds who thronged the piers to greet ships from Britain with shouts of: 'Is Little Nell dead?'

Another comment on transatlantic cultural relations might be that the process is not so much an exchange as an expansion of

American habits of thought and style into a major European, English-speaking country. In other words, Britain is not so much a partner in such exchanges as a channel through which American writing and ideas spread into Europe. Yet even if this were so – and there are many examples to the contrary – there is little sign that British élite literature or thought is losing its own identity. Rather, it has been stimulated by contact with the United States. Where once literary influence might have come from France or Germany or Russia, America is now the source of new styles and ideas. But the traffic is far from one-way and the dialogue is of a kind that hardly exists between other states. Here the English language is not merely the *lingua franca* of air traffic controllers. It is a force breaking through the barriers of cultural provincialism, opening new horizons.

Another aspect of cultural ties is the close relationship that exists between British and American universities. Large numbers of British students go to American universities, and vice versa, mostly for the purposes of post-graduate work. In Britain, significantly enough, more students go to the United States than to continental European universities, except in the case of language students. Exchanges between teaching staff are also numerous, even leaving aside the 'brain-drain' from Britain to America. Moreover, if British scholars are attracted to American colleges by better pay and more lavish research grants, Americans can find in Britain more tranquil conditions for their work. The new threat of a campus lynch law to enforce orthodoxy about such matters as feminism or multicultural consciousness could provide a reason for seeking a post elsewhere. Idiotic though many of the collective utterances of British academics may be, they have not yet reached the depths of intolerance attained in some American universities, even if there has been some slight infection from the 'political correctness' bug – one of the less admirable features of transatlantic exchange.⁸

There is no need to doubt the continuation of cultural ties between America and Britain, which will become closer both on the level of the mass media and that of élite culture. Easier and speedier communication will make the exchange quicker while anticipated wants will give the product an increasingly 'mid-Atlantic' tone. The question is whether mutual understanding is also increased. No doubt, British readers will always be more familiar in their mind's

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eye with New York or Los Angeles than with Omaha or Kansas City, while Americans may become bored with reading British neo-realist novels about single mothers living in Notting Hill Gate. It is easy to be obsessed by 'mid-Atlantic' stereotypes, by the paranoia that informs much of the production of the American mass media or the hedonistic irrelevance of the 'swinging' London images of the Sixties. That such contacts lead to misunderstandings and complaints is inevitable, but does not diminish their importance. This transatlantic traffic is a fact and one that affects the daily lives of citizens of both countries.

3

Economic links

Economic connections between Britain and the United States are a more familiar topic for discussion. Wall Street and the City of London are both major staging posts in that chain of financial transactions that now stretches around the world and reacts to economic change with a new immediacy. America is also, as it always has been, an important trading partner of Britain. This relationship has persisted even after Britain's entry into the European Community in 1973. At present British exports to the United States stand at £12.225 billion per annum (1992 figures) and imports at £13.7 billion. Compared with this, British exports to Germany for the same year were £15.1 billion and imports £19.1 billion. Thus the volume of trade is greater with Germany, but it is less evenly balanced than that with the United States. America still remains an essential partner for the British economy.

Britain too helps to provide capital for American industry, holding until recently the largest foreign direct investment position in the United States. In 1992, however, the British position at \$94.718 billion was slightly behind that of Japan at \$96.743 billion. The biggest investor after these was the Netherlands with \$61.341 billion. Other EEC countries have been comparatively small investors in the United States. These figures form an impressive bond between Britain and America. It is remarkable how little hostile reaction such acquisitions of American enterprises by British financiers have excited. Japan's investments, on the other hand, have met with harsh criticism from American commentators and politicians. The accumulation of Japanese acquisitions in the United States has been held to be a sign of national vulnerability, and the passing of such landmarks as the Rockefeller Centre or the MGM studios into Japanese ownership to mark a decline in American prestige. Similar British acquisitions, however, do not seem to have aroused any latent nationalist feeling. The United States itself has, of course, invested in Britain – Britain receives the lion's share of American investment in the

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European Community – and its position stands at \$77.842 billion (1992 figures).⁹

The size of the reciprocal investment between America and Britain, and the ease with which it has been accepted in both countries, have been affected by cultural factors. Businessmen on both sides of the Atlantic find this kind of investment less difficult than in continental Europe. There, more bureaucracy and regulation attend investments and acquisitions even for a member-state of the European Community. Save in the Netherlands and, partially, in Germany, the instincts of European politicians and officials still have a dash of protectionism in them.

In fact, behind the generally relaxed atmosphere which attends Anglo-American economic relations, lies agreement on the view taken of the world economy. Both countries are advocates of economic liberalism and a world system of free trade. Both are opponents of protectionism and see in international competition over a 'level playing-field' a force making for industrial efficiency and economic prosperity. Both are strong supporters of the post-war economic institutional system – the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and GATT – which was set up to keep the global economic environment as stable as possible and to ensure that free trade should also be fair trade. Both too look forward to a gradual elimination of remaining barriers between the various economic areas of the world – an ambition that has taken a step forward with the approval of the NAFTA agreement by Congress. This concord of view is only disturbed when disputes between the United States and the EEC touch British exports, or when attempts to apply American laws to British firms lead to transatlantic wrangling over legal jurisdiction.¹⁰

This convergence of Anglo-American views on the future of the world economy is important, since it is a major factor behind the special rôle played by Britain as the defender, within the EEC, of 'open' trading policies. This will be discussed below. For the moment, it is sufficient to say that it derives from a similarity of perspective in London and Washington. Among the European Community's member-states only the Netherlands is as devoted to free trade as Britain. Thus in economic matters, as well as in security policies, Britain has usually found itself playing the familiar part of advocate of American views or drafter of compromises between the

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United States and Europe. It should be noted that British support for international free trade and an 'open' posture for the EEC is backed by all major political parties in the United Kingdom, though it has become more pronounced since the 1979 Thatcher government abolished currency controls.

4

The political gap

Curiously enough, it is in the political sphere that contacts between Britain and the United States are at their most distant. Reforming teachers of political science may recommend American constitutional devices, barristers may talk of written constitutions or 'bills of rights', but the theory and practice of American politics seem to have had remarkably little impact on Britain. It is true that the concept of 'rights' has entered British politics with the creation of such bodies as the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality, but its effect has been nothing like what has occurred in the United States, even though those sections of the population which choose to define themselves by their ethnic origins or sexual preferences appear to follow American fashion. As for the 'presidential style' which British Prime Ministers are said to have adopted of recent years, this is probably due to the influence of television and its stylistic requirements as much as to the American example. It is true that reformers look across the Atlantic for a lead (rather than across the Channel) but the results have been singularly unimpressive compared with the amount of influence exercised by the United States in other areas of life. Of course, there are some general resemblances between American and British practice of government and legislation. These stem largely from the heritage of common law and the wide range of voluntary activities common to countries whose culture received the imprint of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.

As for British influence on America, there is little that can be called political, since the 19th century advocacy of a career civil service or the discussions around 1900 of the nature of what seemed at the time to be a new American empire. In fact, it is in the day to day practice of politics that there is a gap in knowledge and experience between the two countries. Political behaviour goes unimitated because it is largely unknown.

For that reason, misunderstandings abound. British political life is interpreted to educated Americans through the medium of a few

much read London correspondents who, throughout the Eighties, were conveying misleading messages on such matters as the prospects of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) or the durability of the Thatcher government. The information was gathered from agreeably liberal social acquaintances in the wealthier quarters of London, and the correspondents also suffered from the usual handicap: the inability to travel, to meet Labour supporters in Wigan or Conservatives in Wiltshire. Similarly, British newspapers neglect the great variety of political behaviour in the United States, ignoring, say, the special political tradition of Wisconsin or the remoteness of Arkansas. Hollywood apart, areas west of the Mississippi receive little coverage unless there are riots in Los Angeles or bizarre doings in San Francisco.

Moreover, lack of personal contacts between politicians of both countries means that they have no opportunity to discuss those many common interests and preoccupations which make the lives of democratic politicians in the late 20th century quite similar: fears over re-election, constituency grumbles, pressure from interest groups, drafting of legislation, committee work, supporting, or differing from, party policies. Nothing arouses more sympathy between politicians from different countries than the realisation that they all share the same problems with their respective constituencies. The absence of opportunities for meeting of minds explains why the US Congress is regarded in Europe as an incomprehensible *deus ex machina*, a sort of legislative King Kong, always ready to be invoked by American negotiators in any international discussion that calls in question economic interests. In Britain, politicians have the opportunity of understanding the political structures of the United States, but they would do so more easily if they met their opposite numbers in Congress more often. As for Americans, they might find that in the course of such contacts, they could acquire a wider view of events in Europe – a view undistorted by linguistic error or the exhaustion of following interpretation systems.

Enough has been said to indicate that American relations with Britain are based more deeply and extend more widely than those with other foreign countries, touching many areas of life other than those defined by government. In that sense the relationship certainly appears to be 'special'. However, when the term is used by politicians or the media, it is usually in the more restricted sense of

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'relations between governments'. Nonetheless, if the wider context of Anglo-American ties is neglected, then it becomes difficult to explain the mutual sympathies on which inter-governmental relations are based and which endow them with the 'special' quality. Economic and cultural bonds, a network of personal familiarity and institutional co-operation are, so to speak, the soil in which mutual political obligations are planted and which impart to them a vigour beyond the ordinary superficialities of diplomatic exchange. The existence of this solid foundation is not called in question by the languishing of relations between governments. It does, however, give to them an added intensity and a certain reverberation in public opinion.

5

The special relationship now

Inter-governmental relations between Britain and the United States were certainly 'special' for a long period of post-war history. That they were so stems from World War II when Anglo-American collaboration was embodied in a series of joint institutions and habits of consultation, some of which have lasted until the present day. All the way down from the 'summits' between Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, there were meetings between chiefs of staff, between Treasury officials and bankers, between intelligence officers and diplomats. After the war was over, much of this machinery of consultation continued on into the period of the Cold War. In the late Forties and early Fifties Britain encouraged and supported the United States in its efforts to block Soviet expansion. This support was of importance at a time when acceptance of the Marshall Plan and the construction of the North Atlantic alliance was only achieved in the countries of Western Europe against intense pressure from the Soviet Union and its communist allies. It was particularly helpful that such backing should come from a Labour government whose Foreign Secretary was a working-class trade unionist.

Later in the Fifties, it was Eden's diplomacy that resolved the difficulties in the way of West German rearmament after the failure of the EDC. In 1954 British diplomacy also played a major rôle in the Geneva conference which brought the post-colonial war in Indochina to an unsatisfactory close by partitioning the country. The agreement was accepted reluctantly by the American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, and his subsequent dislike of Eden may have played some part in the failure of the United States to support its allies, Britain and France, during the Suez episode when the British Prime Minister believed, wrongly, that he had American support. Suez, however, marked a turning-point. Britain would never again take a considerable foreign policy initiative without carefully ascertaining American views.

But, with the best will in the world, misunderstandings still

occurred. Robert McNamara's rationalisation of American weaponry, under the Kennedy administration, led to the cancellation of the Skybolt air-to-ground missile, on which Britain had been relying for its nuclear deterrent system, without, apparently, any realisation on the British side that this might take place or, on the American, of the political consequences for Harold Macmillan's government.¹¹ To phase out European deterrents was the declared objective of State Department 'Atlanticists', and this increased suspicions that Skybolt's cancellation had been a deliberate mistake rather than inadvertence. It was Macmillan's close personal relations with Kennedy that enabled the crisis to be overcome by the Nassau Agreement (18 December, 1962) which substituted the superior Polaris submarine-launched missile system for Skybolt. The episode proved that the 'special' relationship between Britain and the United States still existed – indeed, it added another strand of co-operation to it – but it also showed that there were some American policy-makers who were beginning to see Britain as just one more European state – a point of view expressed in the bizarre proposal for a NATO multilateral nuclear force (MLF). Britain temporised, and President Johnson abandoned a scheme which had no chance of success.

Throughout much of the Sixties and Seventies the United States was preoccupied with the Vietnam war and its aftermath. Britain, while being supportive in the United Nations (UN) and other international forums, could be of little help here. Harold Wilson's maladroit attempts to get into the act as mediator were little more than a fantasy, which irritated the Nixon administration, in any case suspicious of the Labour government's intentions and annoyed by the withdrawal of British forces from East of Suez.¹² Wilson, at least, wished to be taken seriously in Washington, though his evident mythomania denied him success. But the Heath government, which came to power in 1970, appeared to conceive entry into the European Community as implying an actual rejection of any special relationship with the United States. Heath himself had a real distaste for the Anglo-American relationship which he considered as an occasion for self-deception on Britain's part. In Washington too it was felt that Britain's membership of the EEC, though encouraged by American diplomacy, would mean a distancing from the American connection. The internal difficulties of Britain during

the 1970s, which included the overthrow of the Heath government by Arthur Scargill and the National Union of Mineworkers, did not promise any very useful rôle as an ally of the United States. On Mrs Thatcher's only visit to Washington under the Carter administration the courtesies were no more than formal, despite her full support for the United States over the taking of American hostages in Teheran.¹³

With the Reagan administration, everything was different. Between 1982 and 1988 Anglo-American relations could again be called 'special'. Common belief in free market economics, agreement on the need for toughness in face of the Soviet Union and a personal rapport with the President made Mrs Thatcher a privileged visitor to Washington, whose views were heard with respect and sometimes influenced American policy. Now there were no longer reservations about the prolongation of Britain's nuclear deterrent – indeed, the Carter administration had already made no objection to the purchase of the new Trident submarine-launched missile system. Since American administrations now wished to encourage their allies to defend themselves, it seemed logical to transfer technology which would enable them to do so.¹⁴

The close relationship between President Reagan and Mrs Thatcher between 1980 and 1988 had important consequences. Not only did Britain receive essential American support during the Falklands war – support repaid when British bases were used for American air attacks on Libya – but there was also close consultation between the two governments as Gorbachev emerged as a Soviet leader, conscious of the need for economic reform and a more friendly approach to Western Europe. Mrs Thatcher seems to have been the first European head of government to appreciate the significance of Gorbachev and this was duly conveyed to Washington, all the more credibly in that it came from a known anti-communist. Throughout the Reagan administration the two governments acted in close accord. The one exception was the American intervention in Grenada where, embarrassingly, Britain was not informed in advance of the American decision to send in troops.¹⁵

The mutual esteem between President Reagan and Mrs Thatcher survived this quarrel. However, the arrival in power of the Bush administration was marked by a distancing of relations between Downing Street and the White House. With little of Reagan's

feeling of personal rapport with Mrs Thatcher, George Bush and his advisers took the view that it was Germany, strengthened by reunification, which should be treated as America's main ally in Europe. Subsequently, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Mrs Thatcher's immediate reaction to aggression, which compared favourably to Germany's excuses of constitutional inability to send military forces to the Gulf, saw her playing once again the rôle of America's most reliable friend. It was not only international expediency that made her so. Through personal inclination she was viscerally pro-American, admiring the enterprise, the energy and freedom which she found in the American way of life.¹⁶

With a new Prime Minister in Downing Street and a new American President in the White House, Anglo-American relations can be said to have entered a new era. How will they now evolve? Will British Prime Ministers continue to make the journey to Washington? Will they be heard if they do? Or will the connection between Britain and America, so deeply rooted in history, extending over so wide an area of our respective national lives, be broken?

This question brings us back to the present denigration of any idea of a 'special' relationship. The case for such a withering away is often heard nowadays. It runs as follows.

Real British interests lie in Europe, including between 60 to 70 per cent of the country's export trade. The idea of influence in Washington is based on nostalgia for global power which, in Britain's present circumstances, is a form of self-deception. To indulge in it is not merely unrealistic, but positively dangerous. The United States is no longer interested in Britain. Our bad economic record and our need to cut overseas commitments make us less valuable as an ally. After the disappearance of the Soviet threat to Western Europe, the North Atlantic alliance has now become a less essential part of US foreign policy, Europe a less important theatre for the exercise of American power. This implies a dwindling of Britain's rôle as a loyal ally. It becomes logical for the United States to turn to what is now economically the strongest power in Europe: Germany. It follows that if Britain wishes to exercise influence in the world, it must do so by convincing its European partners that its prior commitment is to the European Community. The best way of doing this would be to renounce any claim to influence in Washington and to be ready to stand up to American pressure, were this

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to be exerted against the interests of European countries, political or economic. Such thinking often accompanies the belief that, contrary to the views of Mrs Thatcher, the American economic and social model is inappropriate for this country. Nearer to the traditional Labour corporatism or Conservative paternalism is the 'social market' economy of Germany or the Netherlands. The ills of a post-industrial society – inner city problems, crime, drugs, public disorder, the break-up of the family, the destruction of institutions – are seen as being fuelled by an American-style 'market economy' and its accompanying individualism. So far, therefore, from a 'special' relationship with the United States, which includes admiration and imitation, being of benefit to Britain, it can be positively harmful, inasmuch as it carries with it illusion and a divisive economic and social model.

6

A troubled future?

This argument, however, contains its own refutation. Had it been made at the beginning of the Thatcher government, when Jimmy Carter was still in the White House, it would have seemed equally convincing or unconvincing. Certainly those who regard the 'special' relationship as outdated would have had no less reason to assert their views. Yet the Eighties were to show how welcome a British Prime Minister could be in Washington and how close a working relationship she could have with an American President. This depended on the two personalities in question, but also on an infrastructure of collaboration and exchange of views which, if the occasion offered, was easily brought into practical operation.

The view taken by recent critics of the Anglo-American connection depends on a number of assumptions. These are:

1. That the direction taken by US policy is likely to be one of withdrawal from Europe
2. That the security, provided by the NATO treaty and an American presence in Europe, can now be sufficiently assured by Europeans themselves through the arrangements involving WEU and the machinery, agreed at Maastricht, to further common European foreign and security policies
3. That, therefore, Britain's rôle as a particularly close ally is at an end
4. That, in any case, Britain's attraction to the United States is something to be resisted if we are to play a full part in what is to be an 'ever closer' European Union.

Now, while it is true that the American military presence in Europe no longer requires any massive build-up of forces, now that the military threat from the Soviet Union has ceased to exist, it is not true that America can either disinterest itself in Europe or does not require the means of exercising political influence in that continent. The United States has shown no signs of wishing to dismantle NATO, nor would a majority of its European allies wish it to do so.

Rather, the Atlantic alliance, with American approval, seems to have taken on a new rôle – that of the security branch of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). This is not necessarily a rôle which implies military intervention, but it is concerned with monitoring events in Eastern Europe, keeping an eye on developments there which concern European security and, if necessary, trying to exert political influence on them. A number of East European states would like NATO to go further and offer them a membership which would give security against their always intimidating neighbour to the East. The United States and its allies have been reticent over this demand for membership, out of concern for Russian susceptibilities, but there is no doubt that the continued existence of NATO and, above all, American participation in it have a stabilising influence on Eastern Europe.¹⁷ On his visit to Europe President Clinton inaugurated his 'Partnership for Peace', which, however, gave East Europeans the shadow rather than the substance of what they wanted. The continued preservation of NATO is not necessarily a military matter. It is aimed at keeping an Atlantic forum where security can be credibly discussed and by which political influence can be exercised. As such, it is valuable for the United States and it is inconceivable that American foreign policy should dispense with it. Mr Clinton's European speeches emphasised the importance of Europe to the United States, while also stressing that, as far as Bosnia is concerned, Europeans would be expected to do as they said and not to damage the credibility of the Alliance. Of course, it is clear that if European countries were no longer to maintain the alliance, then the United States would have to make other arrangements, probably of a bi-lateral nature.

There are, in particular, two possible threats to the security of the European continent which make Atlantic security arrangements indispensable to both the United States and its European allies. First, there is the need to continue the nuclear dialogue with the successor states of the Soviet Union and to ensure that none of the nuclear weapons at present shared between Russia, the Ukraine and Kazakhstan fall into irresponsible or aggressive hands. The process of disarmament and arms control must be continued to secure a lower level of armament in Europe and release resources for other purposes (the 'peace dividend'). This is a task which must be undertaken or, in the context of NATO, managed by the United

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States. Only America has the technical devices (spy satellites, sensors of radio-activity, etc.) and the intelligence network to monitor what is happening to the stockpiles within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and to prevent these weapons reaching régimes prepared to use them to blackmail their neighbours.

Secondly, it is only the United States which has the capacity or the will to hold the ring in the Persian Gulf and, as at the time of the Gulf war, to prevent attempts by the larger states to lay hands on smaller but richer neighbours, thus assuring to themselves a sufficient proportion of the region's oil resources to put pressure on those dependent on Gulf oil supplies. Such supplies could, of course, be endangered by political disorder in the Gulf as much as by a planned aggression. The United States and Western Europe, therefore, have a common interest in peace and stability in the Middle East, which extends to a wider area than that immediately around the Gulf. Since securing that interest may require some form of military intervention, this provides another incentive for Europeans and Americans to keep NATO in being.

In addition, it cannot be assumed that Russia will remain disabled as a great power for ever, or even for very long. A Russia which had overcome its political fragmentation and its economic difficulties would once again present a problem for Central and Western Europe, not so much because of its aggressive intentions as because its sheer size in population, territory and potential military resources would disturb the European balance of power, whether its rulers wished it or not. The reassertion of some of the traditional aims of Russian diplomacy would excite nervous reactions in Eastern Europe and in Germany, for whom Russia is already a major diplomatic preoccupation.

Finally, there is the question of missile proliferation – a problem which is unlikely to be solved by diplomacy, or by attempts to halt the spread of missile technology. The proliferation problem presents special difficulties for Britain and France. These are the only European states with a tradition and capability of projecting military power outside the NATO area – a capacity which would be undermined if a Third World adversary were able to strike British or French expeditionary forces, or more seriously still, British or French cities, with missiles armed with nuclear, chemical or biolog-

ical warheads. Russia apart, only the US possesses the technological expertise to build a ballistic defence system capable of thwarting a limited or accidental missile launch.

All these reasons make it essential for the United States, in its own interest and in that of its European allies, to maintain a military presence as well as logistical staging-posts in Europe. Despite the recent ill-tempered remarks of the Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, it is probable that it will do so.¹⁸ For the United States, Western Europe is a route to the Middle East and the gateway to Eastern Europe.

President Clinton's and Mr Christopher's annoyance with the European allies was aroused by their refusal to agree to American views on the Bosnian crisis, including reprisal bombing against Serbia and the lifting of the arms embargo on the Bosnian Moslems. This may be a passing irritation, nor will the United States change its entire attitude towards its European allies because of one episode of disagreement. However, it may be that the Bosnian case is rather more important than at first appears. At the beginning of the Clinton administration Peter Tarnoff, Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, gave a general indication that American commitments around the world had their limits. He said that the United States must: 'define the extent of its commitment and make a commitment commensurate with those realities. This may on occasion fall short of what some Americans would like and others would hope for'.¹⁹ But if American commitments are restricted in the resources that can be assigned to them, while at the same time the United States is prepared to undertake military/political interventions for humanitarian purposes, or in the name of human rights, the consequence is that more must be expected from America's allies. One element of the Clinton foreign policy is a resuscitation of Henry Kissinger's view that regional powers must be ready to cope with dangerous local situations, with American blessing, but without much American aid. If the hope of President Clinton was to get the Europeans to do more to replace the United States as keeper of the peace in Europe, the Yugoslav crisis must have been a considerable disillusionment.

For it is quite clear that any hope that local European crises can be dealt with by Europeans seems destined to disappointment. Since the moment when the egregious Luxembourg Foreign Minister,

Jacques Poo, announced of the Yugoslav civil war: 'This is the hour of Europe; not the hour of the Americans', it has become clear that the slaughter in Bosnia is not merely a blow to humanity, but also to hopes of the member-states of the European Community being able to act together with the necessary speed and effectiveness'.²⁰ As Yugoslavia began to break up, the Twelve were divided in their view of what should be done. Later on there developed agreement between Britain and France to resist any idea of military intervention. Meanwhile, Germany, through its politicians and press urged action while, at the same time, asserting its own inability to contribute to it. Yugoslavia showed what confusion can reign within the Community at moments of crisis. Moreover, only Britain and France possess any troops that would be usable in such situations, and the revolving presidency of the Community means that at the onset of any crisis in European security, the voice of Europe may be that of a politician who has no experience of security problems and no adequate information or advice about the means of coping with them. The European Community certainly does not provide that capacity for preserving peace and stability for which the United States had hoped when it encouraged European political integration. President Clinton had reason to be disappointed with the European performance in general, as well as with its reaction to the suggestions put forward by the United States.²¹ The lesson of Bosnia was that the United States remains the only credible intervener – not only because of its possession of the technical means to carry out such an operation (the logistical capability, intelligence, spy satellites, etc.) but also because it still seems capable of summoning the willpower to make difficult decisions.

If the first two hypotheses listed above have been shown to be fallacious, then it is no longer possible to believe that Britain's rôle as an American ally is at an end. As has been shown above, Europe will continue to need American support within the structure of the North Atlantic alliance – cannot, indeed, do without it – and it is likely that after the disagreement over Bosnia fades, Britain will resume its habitual rôle as the strongest advocate of the alliance. It is clear enough what Britain stands to gain from this attitude: a security that is not dependent on the opinions of Belgium or Luxembourg; but the United States also has advantages to obtain from Britain. The UK is still an important collaborator in the field of

intelligence, and this factor increases in importance when Washington has to do with countries that have historic ties with Britain. Britain is also a usually reliable ally which possesses armed forces that are efficient and accustomed to acting in consort with their American opposite numbers. Above all, Britain still fulfils the rôle which Brooks Adams assigned to it: 'a fortified outpost' – if no longer of 'the Anglo-Saxon race', then of American foreign policy. In respect of the importance of NATO of the desirability of free trade and the harmfulness of protectionist behaviour, in respect of the need for a stern attitude towards terrorism, America and Britain have the same views, and Britain is the representative of such views within the European Community and the WEU. It is a major objective of British foreign policy that the United States should continue to exert an influence on European affairs. It is Britain which has been most emphatic in its belief that agreement in the Uruguay round of trade negotiations in the context of GATT was essential and that any rupture of the talks would have led to a crisis in the European Community and worsened Europe's economic depression. This is a rôle of great importance for the United States, given the temptation to protectionism that exists in France and could exist in Germany – were German industry to deteriorate further. It has been one of the reasons United States' policy originally encouraged British membership of the European Community. The GATT round has now been successfully concluded, but the problem of European protectionism will recur.

America and Britain then have still much to offer each other. This being so, it is a ludicrous proposition to suggest that Britain should renounce its links with the United States for the sake of proving that the European Community is the first of its foreign policy priorities. International relations are not to be conducted in terms of 'either-or'. Relations between states are founded on mutual utility rather than single-minded devotion, and conflicts of interest are dealt with as they arise. In fact, the larger member-states of the European Community all have individual foreign policies of their own. For instance, Germany is developing a 'special' relationship with Russia and the Ukraine. This is a relationship nurtured by apprehension and one that does not necessarily mean that Germany will be less 'European', though it might be more distracted from the business of European integration, were events in the CIS to threaten a crisis in

Eastern Europe. France too has its own particular policy in Eastern Europe, even though President Mitterrand's plan for a European Confederation failed to find any takers. Even Italy had its own Mediterranean and Balkan policy before the present crisis of Italian domestic politics. There is nothing 'anti-European' in Britain's obeying its geographical and historical imperatives by attaching importance to its Atlantic connection. All EEC member-states are European, yes; but each of them is European with a difference – different interests, different ambitions. In fact, it is precisely Britain's traditional global links that make its rôle within any forum of European foreign policy a useful one. In future, now that NAFTA has been approved by Congress, the existence of this new free-trade area, potentially embracing a large part of Latin America, will raise the question of its ties to the European Community, and whether these will expand into a free-trade area stretching from the Pacific to the Pinsk marshes. Such a development would be in the logic of future negotiations within the GATT framework. It is important that Europeans should be conscious of the potential of this great change in the world economic scene and of the opportunities it offers. Britain is well placed to explore such possibilities and point them out to its European partners.

Enough has been said to show that Britain's 'special relationship' with the United States can still have real significance, provided that it is not taken by either country as a formula for the magical exercise of influence. As far as British foreign policy is concerned, it is not necessarily the case that any tension between the transatlantic relationship and the commitment to the European Community is necessarily a disadvantage. Rather, it could be seen as a potential incitement to creativity and mobility in the arrangement of an external policy which requires from British ministers and diplomats a sensitivity to change in world affairs and a readiness to try a variety of solutions to the problems with which we are faced in an unpredictable period of history. Membership of the European Union does not dispense Britain from the need to manoeuvre and make the best of its opportunities. It would be folly to abandon traditional possibilities and relationships for the sake of demonstrating a sincerity that would buy little enough in Paris or Bonn. Just as the American market offers an alternative outlet for British goods and investments at a time of depression in Western Europe, so institu-

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tions like NATO and the CSCE, in which the United States plays a major rôle, offers Britain an alternative field of action to Brussels or Strasbourg and occasion to work in close accord with its American partners. In fact, the objectives of American and British foreign policy – Bosnia apart – remain similar and it is only sensible to regard this as a fact of international relations to be taken into consideration along with others. To refuse to acknowledge or take advantage of the different levels or directions of foreign policy available to a country merely betrays a loss of nerve on the part of policy-makers.

Conclusion

This analysis implies a number of conclusions for those concerned with future British policy:

1. The existence of this complex relationship between Britain and the United States poses limits to what any British government can accept in terms of purely European policies. It would, for example, be unrealistic to believe that any British government could agree to a European Union headed for protectionist or autarchical policies. Equally, future British administrations will have to keep their eye on the objective of links between the European Union and NAFTA with the aim of creating a much wider trading bloc, which could eventually include Eastern Europe and the CIS. This wider free-trade area not only corresponds to British interests, but also to the probable evolution of international economic life. It is certainly in the logic of successive GATT negotiations.
2. It should be borne in mind by the British Government that the possession of efficient and well-armed forces increases its importance in Washington. To run down national defence capacity in the name of a 'peace dividend' would have an effect on the relationship with the United States and, if it went too far, decrease British influence on American policy. It should be a matter of concern that some expert opinion believes that this point may soon be reached as a result of the recent reductions in defence expenditure. A diminution of Britain's intelligence services would have something of the same effect, especially if it implied a dissolution of Anglo-American collaboration in this field or the cutting down of such joint projects as GCHQ in Cheltenham. Although the character of intelligence gathering is bound to change in the aftermath of Soviet collapse, the complexity and rapidity of political change means that intelligence requirements are as likely to be as great as in the Cold War era, if not more so. To a considerable extent the effective conduct of foreign policy has always rested on military prepared-

ness and the state of military alliances; this did not change as a result of Britain's accession to the EC nor with the ratification of Maastricht treaty, whatever the aspirations of the European Federalists. It is not clear, however, whether these factors are fully grasped by ministers. Recent cuts in the armed forces suggest that they are not.

3. Britain's reputation in Washington is also involved with the success or failure of this country's domestic politics. Mrs Thatcher's acceptance as a partner by the Reagan administration was partly conditioned by her achievements in areas such as trade union law, privatisation and improvement in industrial performance. 'While she was Prime Minister', wrote the Wall Street Journal recently, 'Britain was not a nation in decline'.²² The effect on foreign observers of determination and the exercise of political will should not be underestimated.
4. British governments should encourage knowledge of, and contacts with, American institutions. There is very little comprehension in this country – or, indeed, in other European countries – of how American federalism works, its advantages and disadvantages (and this at a time when there is so much discussion of federalism in Europe). The sovereign states of the American Union also have much of relevance to offer Britain, examples of policies developed regionally, which are hardly ever described in the media (eg, the success of the State of North Carolina in promoting international banking and trading contacts to encourage domestic economic development). Many areas of British life and its economic and social problems could be compared, with profit, with similar situations in the United States. In Britain there is a tendency to assume a knowledge of America, which we certainly possess in a fragmented form, but which does not necessarily add up to a real understanding of United States' institutions or politics. To remedy this, governments should systematically encourage contacts between the two countries at all levels.
5. Part of this process would be the encouraging of cultural contacts, which on the demotic level is hardly needed; however, a real knowledge of élite culture in America, together with the factors that have created it, is another thing altogether.

CONCLUSION

It is the general contention of this paper that Britain's relationship with the United States is a considerable political, economic and cultural fact which has an impact on many areas of British life, all the stronger for finding expression without legal regulation. Any British government should constantly be aware of this dimension to national policy and draw the appropriate conclusions in the relevant sectors of its own activity.

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