

The Anglo-American “Special Relationship”: myth and reality

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ABSTRACT

The “Special Relationship” between the United Kingdom and the United States emerged late in the history of the two states. It was actually the Second World War, a genuine matrix for the future evolution of the Anglo-American relationship, that saw the establishment of a multi-dimensional military cooperation, a unique nuclear alliance, and a diplomatic partnership that deeply shaped both the postwar global order and the architecture of Euro-Atlantic security. However, the power of Churchill’s discourse that spread the myth of an idyllic Anglo-American entente could not mask diverging interests, as well as the continued existence of a rivalry at the heart of the relation between the two powers. The “Special Relationship” must therefore also be interpreted as a diplomatic stratagem, which the British deliberately used to maximize their influence in Washington, and compensate for their relative decline.



The Allies sculpture by Lawrence Holofcener in the West End of London, representing Churchill and Roosevelt, was inaugurated in May 1995, and demonstrates the vitality of the “Special Relationship” myth. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

What better example of the power of myths in international relations than the concept of the “Special

Relationship,” which Churchill used for the first time in his famous Fulton speech delivered in March 1946? The former Prime Minister called for deepening the “fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples,” beginning with the specific bonds existing between the United States and the United Kingdom, in order to contend with the new danger of Stalin’s USSR. Born himself of a father from the English patrician elite and a mother from New York, and author of the monumental *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*—in which he reveals his belief in the cultural and political superiority of Anglo-Saxon peoples—Churchill was the driving force behind the constitution of a unique relation between the British and Americans during the Second World War. By contrast, President Roosevelt was more reserved, constrained by the deep neutralism of American public opinion, at least until the surprise attack by Japan on Pearl Harbor Naval Base in December 1941 brought about a major change. It was in the joint fight against Axis forces that the reality and myth of the Anglo-American “Special Relationship” simultaneously emerged.

Yet nothing was self-evident between the former metropole and the American Republic, which had to wage two wars against London to establish and defend its independence (1775-1783 and 1812-1814). Before the 1940s, there was nothing extraordinary about the bilateral relationship, which fluctuated between tensions and indifference. A first rapprochement was attempted during the early decades of the twentieth century, although their joint engagement alongside France during the First World War did not lead to any kind of Anglo-American proximity. On the contrary, tensions reemerged when the United States disengaged once again from European affairs at the outset of the 1920s.

Something undeniably new thus emerged beginning in 1940, which was the fruit of all the efforts deployed by Churchill to establish an exceptional personal relationship with Roosevelt, and to convince him to become involved in the fight against Hitler. What resulted was first and foremost what the American general George Marshall described as “the most complete unification of military effort ever achieved by two allied states.” This military cooperation would later represent a major continuity, as the engagement against the common Soviet enemy during the Cold War only extended the fraternity of arms that began between 1941-1945. After 1989, the two armies fought side by side in the Balkans, and more recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. A second aspect of this exceptional Anglo-American proximity is collaboration in matters of atomic research. British scientists were included in the Manhattan Project in August 1943. While the McMahon Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1946 ended this cooperation, the Anglo-American nuclear alliance was relaunched beginning in 1958, and led to a unique strategic and technological partnership, despite the quite often divergent interests of the two greatly asymmetrical partners. Finally, together Churchill and Roosevelt made major political decisions regarding the outlines of the new postwar world order. The Atlantic Charter, which was signed by both men in August 1941, called for the coming of a democratic world that respected individual liberties and announced the emergence of the postwar “welfare state.” It also prefigured the establishment of the United Nations, in addition to the new global economic order that emerged from the Bretton Woods conference (July 1944), which saw the triumph of Anglo-American concepts based on the dollar, free convertibility of currency, and free trade.

In his *Memoirs*, Churchill greatly contributed to spreading the myth of an idyllic Anglo-American entente, which should extend beyond war, in order to ensure the preservation of common interests and the common good. A number of important Anglo-American executive couples were deliberately in keeping with this tradition of a good interpersonal relationship at the highest level founded by Churchill and Roosevelt, such as Macmillan and Kennedy in the early 1960s, with for instance the major success of the Nassau Agreement of 1962 (providing for British nuclear submarines to be equipped with the American Polaris missile and integrated within NATO command), Thatcher and Reagan during the 1980s in the context of the new Cold War, or more recently Blair and Bush, who jointly conducted the “War on Terror,” notably by launching the highly controversial Second Gulf War against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 2003.

Beginning in the 1970s, historians nevertheless brought to light a much more ambivalent image of the Anglo-

American relationship; while of course exceptionally intense, the Anglo-American alliance nevertheless has evolved according to the balance of power between London and Washington, which caused tensions and divergences. In fact, from the very period of Churchill, the preservation of the British Empire and the role reserved for De Gaulle's France after the war were sources of friction. Due to the persistence of the rivalry between the two states even as they collaborated, the paradox of a "competitive cooperation" took hold. Going further, the British historian David Reynolds has shown that with respect to the "Special Relationship," British leaders deliberately constructed a myth and invented a diplomatic tradition, in view of better promoting British interests: in the end, it was a genuine stratagem, aiming to use the cultural characteristics shared by the Americans and British to bring about a specific close relationship with the new American superpower, and to thereby compensate for the inevitable decline of British power. While British leaders believed deep down that they possessed greater wisdom in international matters, which enabled them to guide the newcomer on the global stage in a direction favorable to their own interests, over time the Anglo-American relationship became increasingly unbalanced, and hence inevitably less central from the U.S. point of view.

The influence of the "Special Relationship" myth was such that British leaders, who helped forge and regularly reactivate it, themselves ended up believing in it. This had the secondary effect of delaying the United Kingdom's adjustment to its status as a chiefly European power, as demonstrated still today by the unrealistic hopes of the most fervent supporters of Brexit. No doubt one of the most crucial effective contributions of the "Special Relationship" was to make the United States definitively emerge from its isolationism, thereby enabling the emergence of the Atlantic Alliance, which benefited all of Western Europe— in this regard, the role of British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin was essential. Nevertheless, at the moment of the "pivot to Asia" conducted by the United States since Obama's presidency, or the neo-nationalism initiated by the current President Trump, one may wonder whether the myth of the "Special Relationship" has not become, from the viewpoint of British interest, a source of illusions that should be deconstructed.

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