

BRITAIN AND AMERICA: THE LESSONS OF HISTORY
ST GEORGE'S HOUSE ANNUAL LECTURE
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Your Royal Highnesses, Mr Dean, distinguished guests, it is the very greatest honour to be invited to give this year's St George's House lecture.

I begin with a confession. I did not cross the Atlantic until 1985, when I was already over 40. I read somewhere that the most common dream of the British people is to have tea with Her Majesty The Queen. Mine was always to go to America.

It was the late Lord Howe – Geoffrey Howe, one of the great Foreign Secretaries - who made the dream reality.

The year previously I had been minding my own business in the British Embassy in Moscow, when he paid an official visit to the Soviet Union. He took me out onto the Embassy balcony, with its splendid view of the walls and towers of the Kremlin on the other side of the Moscow river. He asked me if I would like to

be his press secretary. I asked him what this would involve. He replied, “You will find out soon enough.” And on that note I was hired.

Twelve months later I found myself with Geoffrey in New York City for the annual opening of the United Nations General Assembly.

I remember with vivid clarity that first morning on American soil. John’s Diner on the corner of 42nd and 2nd, two eggs over easy, hash browns, crispy bacon, toast, jelly: all to the sound of the raucous conversation of office workers, waiters and New York’s Finest.

It was a magnificent time to be a British diplomat in the United States. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were enjoying the closest of political and personal relationships, their alliance suffused with self-confidence. They were bound together by a belief in strong defences, free trade, western democracy and resolute opposition to Soviet communism. Their relationship deserved to be called “special”.

But that was then and this is now.

Today we live in the age of what I call the Great Unravelling. The rules-based system of international order, created under American tutelage at the end of the Second World War, is, at best, under increasing stress, at worst, fractured beyond repair, as last week's G7 summit so vividly – and farcically - demonstrated.

After more than half a century, an eternity for alliances, this is perhaps only to be expected.

But what we did not expect was that the President of the United States would himself eagerly assume the role of unraveller-in-chief – a role where instinct and a love of self-centered theatre would, as it were, trump received wisdom and knowledge.

If ever there were a time to consider the relationship with America dispassionately and without sentiment, it is now – in times so extraordinary that they challenge most of our inherited assumptions.

I have at home a book of essays, published in 1986, which is the collective result of work done over a year by scholars and experts under the auspices of the Ditchley Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington DC. The

theme is the British-American relationship – its condition and its prospects. Its title is “The Special Relationship”.

The original intention of the project had never been to put the so-called Special Relationship front and centre. No less a person than Dean Acheson, Harry Truman’s secretary of state and the son of an English-born priest, had been rude about the concept, warning his American colleagues to suppress their “sentimental” impulses; while the late David Watt, a key contributor to the project - director of Chatham House and a very august journalist indeed - called it rhetorical nonsense.

Yet, as the American editor, Professor Roger Louis, noted in his preface,

“The idea ...of a ‘Special Relationship’ would not go away. Indeed it haunted the discussions. Eventually it was referred to as the ghost, ever present yet elusive, derided by some but acknowledged by all.”

In the end the assembled academics and experts capitulated to the ghost and decided to address the notion of a Special Relationship head on. They asked themselves, in their various areas of expertise, why was it special? Was it a good thing? What had become of it? Had it run its course? The answers

were assembled in their book. By and large the ghost got positive reviews.

The extraordinary thing is that thirty or so years later, the ghost is still with us. It haunts British-American relations to this day. It poses the same questions as in 1986.

Attempts have been made to exorcise it. Harold Wilson replaced it with the simple “close” relationship. Edward Heath preferred the “natural” relationship. David Cameron, when President Obama first came to Britain in 2011, talked of the “essential” relationship.

None of these adjectives has endured, leaving Professor Louis' ghost undisputed sovereign of its spectral realm.

Did not Theresa May and Donald Trump once again affirm the Special Relationship during her visit to Washington in 2017?

Mind you, in this respect, Mr Trump is a promiscuous president, using the self-same epithet to describe Franco-American relations, when President Macron of France went to Washington earlier this year.

The ghost's durability is all the more striking, since, until the second world war, there had been nothing in British and American history after independence to suggest a special intimacy. At least the French had helped the Americans win the Revolutionary War.

In the nineteenth century, there was the War of 1812, followed by various alarms and excursions along the border with Canada and in South America, where Britain and the US almost came to blows. In the last century the moment of comity during the first world war soon vanished. The negotiations in the 1920s to limit naval armaments became so acrimonious that the Americans drew up plans for war with Britain. Strong anti-British forces were at work to keep the US out of the second world war on Britain's side.

Even during the war, as the great historian (not the politician), Sir Michael Howard, points out in his contribution to *The Special Relationship*, the military leadership was for long marked by

“suspicious dislike on the American side and patronising contempt on the British.”

Sir Michael Howard is very clear that the spirit of friendly cooperation that had become more the norm by the end of the war flowed from the personal intimacy between Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill.

I am always astonished by the fact that in 1943 Roosevelt left Churchill to his own devices in the White House, where he held meetings with American officials and generals, while the President visited his family at Hyde Park on the Hudson River.

Howard is also pretty clear that, as he put it, the relationship “never quite recovered” from Roosevelt’s death and Churchill’s loss of office even before the war ended.

Harry Truman and Clement Attlee, their respective successors, were very different personalities and politicians. Neither particularly wanted to get to know the other. Their relationship was from the outset blighted by the mutual recrimination over the negotiation at the war’s end of an American loan to Britain - a negotiation so stressful that it killed the illustrious John Maynard Keynes, the leader of the British negotiating team.

The point of giving you this piece of potted history is this. When Churchill promulgated the notion of a special relationship with the US in his 1946 speech at Fulton, Missouri, it was neither

the most propitious moment nor did it go with the grain of history.

He had told the Commons not long before the Fulton speech,

“We should not abandon our special relationship with the United States and Canada about the atomic bomb...”

What he had in mind was a relationship of equals, brought intimately together by the common stewardship of nuclear weapons as *“a sacred trust,”* as he put it, *for the maintenance of peace.*”

The United States - rich, victorious and all-powerful - was having none of that from a bankrupt European power, whose empire they had for long wished to see dismantled.

In 1946, the same year as Churchill’s speech President Truman approved the McMahon Act, which halted US cooperation on nuclear technology with even the closest allies. That was seen in London as scant reward for our contribution to the Manhattan Project. It was, if you like, *America, First* with a vengeance.

The tone had once again been set by the unsentimental Dean Acheson, who opined that

“a unique relation existed between Britain and America...but unique did not mean affectionate. We had fought England as our enemy as often as we had fought by her side as an ally.”

It took fifteen years after the end of the second world war before Harold Macmillan - another Anglo-American prime minister worried about nuclear weapons - and John F. Kennedy were able to restore much of the warmth and intimacy of Roosevelt and Churchill. But in that intervening decade and a half, Britain had had to learn the brutal lesson that Churchill's grand vision of a partnership of equals was a delusion. It bore no relation to the actual balance of power between the two sides of the Atlantic.

Paradoxically this had been made plain beyond doubt by both a low point and a high point in the relationship: the low being the Suez debacle of 1956 when the US had forced us, with France and Israel, to abandon military operations against Egypt; and the high, the deal struck by Kennedy and Macmillan in the Bahamas in 1962 for Britain to buy the Polaris missile, so guaranteeing an independent, sort of, British nuclear deterrent – an agreement which in its essence survives to this day.

After Nassau, the Special Relationship rose like Lazarus from the tomb. But it wasn't what Churchill had envisaged. It was something else. To the über-realist Sir Michael Howard it was a Faustian bargain. He commented drily,

“Britain’s role was now that of loyal and subordinate ally, or it was nothing.”

There are lessons to be drawn from this history.

The first is that since the Second World War, at the level of high politics, relations between Britain and America have been more marked by their volatility than by their stability. Seen as a line on a graph, they have to be drawn as a sequence of peaks and troughs.

After the closeness of Macmillan and JFK, there were the lean years of Edward Heath and Richard Nixon, of Harold Wilson and Lyndon Johnson, when the light of the Special Relationship was well-nigh extinguished.

This had nothing to do with party affiliation either in London or Washington. Heath was a Tory, Nixon a Republican; Wilson was Labour, Johnson a Democrat. You might have expected each pair of leaders to have a mutual political sympathy. But

there was none. Heath preferred Europe to America. Wilson turned down Johnson's request to send troops to Vietnam. He also insisted on smoking a pipe in the Oval Office, which Johnson, a cigar smoker, abhorred. I was always told that Wilson actually preferred a cigar, but thought that a pipe better suited his man-of-the-people image.

And so we go on. Margaret Thatcher enjoyed a relationship with Ronald Reagan of unusual intimacy. She got on less well with George Bush 41, who found her bossy and over-bearing. John Major was far more to 41's taste; they had a close relationship. Major and Bill Clinton enjoyed each other far less, with their contrasting temperaments and policy differences over Northern Ireland. Blair/Clinton and Blair/Bush 43 were marriages made in heaven, when the Special Relationship blazed forth in neon lights.

President Obama, not renowned for the warm embrace of any foreign leader and suspected of anti-British feelings, threw Gordon Brown and David Cameron the occasional bone of a mention of the Special Relationship, but with no great enthusiasm. Stories emerged last year of Obama's staff mocking us for our pretensions.

As for Donald Trump, yes, he has talked the talk from time to time, and has held Theresa May's hand, though probably to keep his balance. Now, we are told, he has come to dislike what he allegedly describes as her school teacher's tone.

But, I hear you cry, how can we possibly talk of a Special Relationship with President Trump, after his imposition of a swingeing twenty-five percent tariff on imports of EU steel, which could lead to the loss of several thousand British jobs?

Good question. To which I would reply that, over the decades, trade wars have been part of the warp and woof of the so-called Special Relationship. In my lifetime, we have endured chicken wars, banana wars, egg wars, large civil aircraft wars and, yes, steel wars in 2002, when the Americans imposed tariffs on our imports, just as we were sending the Royal Marines to help American forces in Afghanistan.

This brings me to my second lesson.

What matters in a relationship is not sentiment, but interests; not rhetoric, but *realpolitik*. There is no room in the British-American relationship for the rose-tinted spectacles of Churchillian nostalgia.

When I was ambassador in Washington, I banned the use of the phrase “Special Relationship” by embassy staff. I did not want them to fall into the self-harming heresy of believing that sentiment could override national interest.

It is fine for British and American politicians to invoke the Special Relationship as a rhetorical device to embellish speeches. But it becomes a problem if, as has been the case all too often on the British side, you start to believe your own propaganda. It can raise unrealistic expectations and exaggerate the identity of interest between our two countries.

Close relations are not an end in themselves. They are the means by which the national interest is safeguarded and advanced.

I was once shown by the great Colin Powell, Secretary of State under George W. Bush, a short speech of welcome that he was going to give for the new Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, on his first visit to DC. Powell had scrawled across the top of the page in black felt-tip pen “Don’t forget the Special Relationship!” I pointed to it, quizzically. Powell replied: “You Brits will go ape-shit if I don’t mention it.”

Not only does this kind of thing make us look humiliatingly needy. We forget that the Americans long ago weaponised the idea of a Special Relationship to their own advantage.

I once found myself in a very tough negotiation on air services across the Atlantic. Every time I said 'no' to exorbitant American demands, I was either accused of not caring about the Special Relationship; or threatened with its imminent demise unless we gave the US what it wanted.

This, incidently, is exactly the approach that I would expect the Americans to take in any future trade talks. It does not help that most American negotiators seem to have been trained as litigation lawyers.

Now, in case anyone detects, wrongly, a whiff of anti-Americanism in my remarks, let me say this.

I lived and worked as a diplomat for eleven years in Washington DC, longer than anywhere but London itself. I love America and would happily live there, if I were not a Londoner through and through. I believe the natural condition of our relations to be warm and friendly. How could it be otherwise, given the vast concentration of British and American interests

invested in the relationship: economic, defence, intelligence, to name but three, often invisible to the naked eye?

But make no mistake. These things are not there because of misty sentiment. They are there because the hard national interests of each side demand that they should be.

Which brings me just for a moment to Europe. I have no intention, you will be pleased to hear, of getting into Brexit, whose quicksands will swallow you up before you can say Juncker.

I would only make the point that this is not our first Brexit. In 1818 we walked out of the Concert of Europe, which had brought together the victorious powers after Napoleon's defeat only three years previously. We did not like the idea of losing control of our foreign policy. Not long after, the Concert and its congress system proceeded to collapse. I say no more.

Except for one thing. The fact that it is a Frenchman leading the negotiations for the EU27 does give rise to a twitch of concern. I found myself many years ago negotiating with a French team in Brussels. The topic was tariff quotas for the importation into the EU of Romanian leather shoes – I know, the blood runs faster – and we were deadlocked. Finally, the Frenchman said,

“I agree, M. Meyer, that what you are proposing will work in practice, but what concerns my government is, will it work in theory?”

This seems very much M. Barnier’s philosophy when confronted by our relentless pragmatism.

Your Royal Highnesses, ladies and gentlemen, it is not just in the British-American relationship that one can find today this gap between rhetoric and reality. There is something similar afoot in the European Union, where, in place of Churchill and the Special Relationship, we have the founding fathers - Monnet, Schuman, Adenauer, de Gasperi - and the sacred flame of Ever Closer Union.

The high priests of the European Commission are the guardians of the flame. But the member-states march to the beat of national interest. This is why the EU’s future will be overwhelmingly decided by the reconciliation of the German and French national interest.

I have never forgotten when, as ambassador to Germany in 1997, I went to hear Chancellor Kohl address a CDU meeting in the Rhineland town of Bad Godesberg. It was supposed to be a

closed, private occasion. But with the name “Meyer”, blond hair, German blood and a reasonable command of the language, it was not difficult to get in.

At the time Kohl was anxious about selling to the German people the abandonment of the cherished *deutschmark* for the euro. He told his audience that European integration and the adoption of the euro were the price that Germany had to pay for dominating Europe without frightening its neighbours - an expression of the purest *realpolitik*.

Later in 1997, when I was leaving Germany to become ambassador to the US, I went to say good-bye to someone very senior in the Finance ministry. He asked me if Britain would adopt the euro. I replied that I thought it unlikely. He said: “That’s a pity. We don’t want to be left alone with the French.”

On my way back to London, I stopped in Paris at the invitation of our ambassador. He took me down to the Quai d’Orsay to see someone very senior, who asked me if Britain would adopt the euro. I said that I thought it unlikely. He replied: “Oh no, we don’t want to be left alone with the Germans.”

There you have it. The *realpolitik* behind Ever Closer Union.

Let us be similarly pragmatic about The Special Relationship in the age of Trump, or, as Henry Kissinger might put it, let us take a rigorously realist approach.

Not long ago I took part in a discussion of whether Mr. Trump had a coherent foreign policy. My answer was, no, he didn't. But, I added, he didn't have an incoherent one either. There was simply no strategic there, there.

For instance, Russia and China are identified as a major threat in the 2017 US National Security Strategy. That's clear enough. But President Trump's relationship with President Putin is, to quote Churchill's phrase, a riddle, wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Why on earth did he just call for the readmission of Russia into the G7? The riddle may or may not be solved by Robert Mueller, the Special Counsel, now investigating the Trump campaign's alleged links to Russian efforts to sabotage Hillary Clinton's campaign.

It is likewise almost impossible to work out whether Mr. Trump sees China as an adversary or a partner. Is President Xi to be admired or feared? Or both? Is NATO an alliance to be supported? Or is it a bunch of freeloaders, who should pay more for their own defence if they want American help in time of need?

And yet...and yet, as Boris Johnson recently said, when he thought he was speaking privately, there is method in Mr. Trump's madness. There is also predictability in his unpredictability. I owe this insight to Fred Hiatt, the editorial page editor of the Washington Post, who wrote last month that Mr. Trump:

...is proving to be the most predictable of presidents...because he makes decisions based on instincts and biases acquired decades ago...Advisers can delay but not dislodge him from his ruts..Since his prejudices are well-known, his decisions should not surprise.

What are these instincts and biases? Dictators are to be admired. True leaders are above the law. Intellectuals are not to be trusted. Surprise and dislocation are weapons of choice in negotiation. Received wisdom exists to be smashed. Multilateral diplomacy works against American interests. Trade deficits are a sign of national weakness and must be eliminated. Allies play the US for a sucker. And – perhaps most important of all – anything achieved by President Obama should be undone.

Thus, the withdrawals from the Paris Climate Accord, from the nuclear deal with Iran, from the Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership and, possibly, from the North American Free Trade Agreement.

As for North Korea and his meeting this week with Kim Jong-Un, the jury is out and will stay out until we see what follows. The meeting was undeniably historic and dramatic, a pure expression of Trumpism. It was, as it was intended to be, great TV. But only time will tell whether it was great diplomacy.

We must note also that, in John Bolton, the National Security Adviser, and Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State, Mr Trump has put in place two close advisers, who, unlike their predecessors, go with his grain. The result is an strongly nationalist, unilateralist stance, sailing under the flag of our old friend, *America, First*.

It may not bode well that in his memoirs Mr. Bolton referred dismissively to Europeans as flaccid Euroids and expressed a clear preference for Aussies over Brits, because we are apparently too snooty.

Years ago, when I was speech-writer to the Labour foreign secretary, Jim Callaghan, who later became prime minister, he used to say when confronted by a complex problem, "Play it

with a straight bat, lad,” a cricketing metaphor you don’t hear much these days.

And that, I suggest, is exactly how to respond to President Donald Trump. We must play him with a straight bat, the straight bat of our national interest and not the mirage of the Special Relationship. Whether we find him abhorrent, baffling or admirable, we cannot forget that he is the elected leader of the world’s most powerful nation; and that our security depends in large measure on our sustaining a good working partnership with the White House.

If the Dean will allow it, I propose to pin four theses to the doors of St George’s Chapel:

1. Is America our single most important national ally and partner? Absolutely.
2. Does this mean that our respective national interests will always coincide? Absolutely not.
3. Should we stand up vigorously for our interests when they conflict with the American? Absolutely.
4. Will having rows with the Americans undermine the fundamentals of the relationship? Absolutely not.

When in 1983 Margaret Thatcher protested volubly and at length on the phone to Ronald Reagan at his invasion of the tiny Caribbean, Commonwealth island of Grenada, he turned to his advisers in the Oval Office and said, switching on the speaker-phone,

“Ain’t she wonderful?!”

So, of course, Donald Trump should visit the UK. If, despite massive protests against the Iraq war, George W. Bush was able in 2003 to pay a State visit without incident, Trump’s working visit next month should be perfectly manageable. Nothing is served by telling him that he is not welcome.

Of course, for a truly successful visit, we will need to give President Trump as much pomp, circumstance, royalty and golf, as tight security will allow.

And if we can accomplish all that, you know what will happen?

At the end of the visit, the Prime Minister and the President will proclaim the Special Relationship to be alive and well; the media will then sigh with relief that they will be able to continue to have this lazy way of taking the temperature of the

relationship; and Professor Louis' ghost will whisper in my ear:
"I told you so. I win again".

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