

Whither the Special Relationship?

Bush, Blair, and Britain's Future

By Ian Williams | December 16, 2003

The recent spectacle of President George W. Bush being paraded through the streets of London by Tony Blair to celebrate the “Special Relationship,” provokes the question of what is so special about it. For example, during Bush’s visit, the British prime minister did not secure from his friend American adherence to international law for British internees in Guantanamo. Blair does not get listened to over expanding the UN role in Iraq, nor even over the importance of getting the Middle East peace process seriously on track.

Yet there is indeed a special relationship. While there were massive demonstrations against Bush, polls showed that many British did feel remarkably friendly to the U.S., even if they had reservations about this particular president and his actions. Perhaps a measure is the lack of controversy about British involvement in Afghanistan following the attacks of September 11th. One does not have to be too cynical to wonder whether a similar attack on Britain would have resulted in as much automatic domestic support in the United States for what looked like a long and hard war.

But that highlights what is really special about the relationship—its unrequited asymmetry. The U.K. has surrendered a surprising amount of sovereignty to the U.S. In 1948, the Labor government invited American bombers, nuclear armed, to bases in Britain, and they have been there since, making Britain an automatic participant in World War III. Britain provides bases around the world for the U.S., and the joint arrangements on intelligence means the U.S. government can spy on its own citizens’ phone calls from the shared facilities in Britain.

While Britain developed its own nuclear weapons, (with, incidentally no help from the U.S. States, despite sending all its own research to its ally during WW II) in the 1960s, the then conservative government in effect gave up development of any means of delivery. Britain secured the technology first for Polaris, then for Trident nuclear submarine systems.

There have been hiccoughs. Dwight Eisenhower, quite correctly, forced the U.K. and France to get out of Egypt when they invaded Sinai in 1956, and on the other side, Britain’s Harold Wilson fought off Lyndon Johnson’s attempts to embroil Britain in Vietnam. In both cases, Washington’s leverage was the shakiness of sterling as a declining reserve currency.

Until recently, the two sides also agreed to differ on the Middle East. Britain, even under Margaret Thatcher, regularly voted for resolutions at the UN that the United States vetoed. However, under Blair’s second term, even that difference has been half-resolved. More out of loyalty to the United States than to Israel, Britain now regularly abstains rather than defy Washington on such issues. Apart from any ethical dimensions such as Palestinian rights, this recent course of action is likely to erode Britain’s close commercial relations in the Arab world that were so assiduously cultivated by Thatcher.

Unsinkable Aircraft Carriers

On the other hand, the gains to the U.S. are clear. It gets an unsinkable aircraft carrier moored off Europe, and a reliable and not insignificant diplomatic and military ally to save it from the total isolation to which its policies would so often have condemned it. And it comes without baggage. It does not have to pay anything in the way of aid or subsidies, nor indeed, in any special treatment commercially, as Blair rediscovered recently. Perhaps the one



Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)

www.fpi.org
A Think Tank Without Walls

concrete payback was use of satellite information during the Falklands war—but even then people like Jeane Kirkpatrick were unhappy with the choice of sides.

So is there any advantage to Britain from this relationship? Surely it is time for a reassessment. Times have changed since the first post-war Labor Party Prime Minister Clement Attlee allowed himself to hope that Britain and the United States, although unequal in power, could be “equal in counsel.” Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan inadvertently got closer to reality later when he saw Britain as Athens to America’s Rome, teachers and civilizers to the emperors. The Romans enslaved the Athenians, stole their culture—and not once took any counsel from those they had conquered.

The relationship was one-sided, even when it was most mutually advantageous to both parties. During World War II, as Clive Ponting demonstrates in his book, 1940, the U.S. Treasury took advantage of the British government commitment to defeating Hitler no matter what the cost, to make sure that it did, indeed, cost Britain. The United States set strict limits on how much foreign exchange its ally was allowed to hold, and cut off lend-lease as soon the amount was exceeded.

Much of the “special relationship” was based on personal relations: Churchill/Roosevelt, Macmillan/Kennedy, Blair/Clinton, and now Blair/Bush. But it certainly does not have the Congressional backing that the Israel or Cuban-American lobbies can give a policy.

Churchill selflessly handed over all of Britain’s atomic research to the United States. When after the war, Attlee asked for the promised reciprocity, he was told that Congress would not allow it. That did not stop him and Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin from working desperately to get NATO off the ground. The post-war Labor government, which Churchill attacked for detracting from British sovereignty by allowing American nuclear bases in the UK after the Berlin crisis, had sound reasons for tolerating this otherwise intolerably asymmetric relationship. Britain was bankrupted by the war, and its leaders, having just stood alone against one continental enemy,

Germany, did not relish standing alone waiting several years again for the Americans to come if Stalin rolled westward.

There was certainly no sentimentality on the American side. Conscious that the British needed the United States more than the other way round, the parties fell into the dismissive condescension which still characterizes the special relationship. Britain has had some seriously self-deluding leaders, but surely none was so stupid as to expect American self-sacrifice on the scale of nuclear war on behalf of Britain. But right from the first arrival of USAF nuclear bombers, it has been clear that the U.S. could start a nuclear war that would leave the unsinkable aircraft carrier dead in the radioactive water.

But things have changed since Britain and the Western Europeans initiated NATO after the Berlin crisis with a very specific agenda: to keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down. In contrast, for a decade now, we have been chivvying the Germans to take up military responsibilities, while the Russians cannot fight their way into Chechnya, let alone Western Europe, which leads to the very serious question: Why do we need to keep the Americans in?

Beyond the Special Relationship?

One aspect of this was, of course, Europe. Only a decade ago, Conservative Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd declared that British policy was the same as in the days of Pitt the Younger: to ensure that no hostile combination of powers could arise in continental Europe. This fatuously outdated policy, understandable in an era of wooden ships with a three-mile-maximum cannonball range, took the modern form of stirring up trouble in the European Union between France and Germany—and relying on the U.S. for backstopping, just in case the Russians changed their minds.

One cannot help suspecting that the ghost of this policy still haunts Whitehall. If Britain had a genuine, reciprocal, special relationship with the United States, it could be argued that this gave it leverage in Europe. But it is clear to Europe that Tony Blair’s public subservience to Bush’s neo-Imperial policies

does not get London one extra ton of steel past American protectionism. The pound no longer needs U.S. support. Indeed, it is more the plummeting dollar that needs the pound and Euro for back-up.

If you want to see a real special relationship, look at Ariel Sharon, who runs rings round Bush administration officials if ever they hint that he should keep his word about the Road Map.

In return, Sharon (and indeed his predecessors) gets billions of dollars a year in aid, a cast-iron guarantee of support no matter which war he starts, a veto in the UN on demand, and discrete support for weapons of mass destruction. And Israel has always shied away at the idea of any U.S. bases on its territory, and has not fought a single war beside the United States.

Tony Blair was elected with a pledge for Britain to play an active and full role in Europe. Instead, he has mostly shown why Charles de Gaulle vetoed Britain's first attempt to join the Union when he assumed, correctly, that it would be a Trojan Horse for American influence. For the years Blair has been in office, his Conservative opposition has been so blimpishly anti-European that he has looked relatively cosmopolitan and pro-EU, even though he has fought off moves to a closer union, and is still dithering at the altar about joining the Euro.

It is surely time for a reassessment. If Ireland, or Jamaica, or Chile, or New Zealand, can pursue an independent foreign policy, and bargain with Washington, then why should the United Kingdom be the old mistress, always waiting and available, but with no claim on American generosity? It is time for Britain either to play hard-to-get or to work seriously on an amicable separation.

Blair's claimed hand on the steering wheel over Iraq proved ineffectual. What he needed was a brake on the locomotive, of the kind that only a publicly-stated difference can get. Whispering respectful disagreements to the White House does not do the job with this administration. In the longer term, Britain's unremitting servility to American policies has disrupted the attempts of Europe to build, not necessarily an opposition, but an alternative center of power in the world.

Last month's British agreement to begin EU joint military planning, despite American displeasure, shows that there is still some hope. Although the chances of the once Euro-phile Blair returning to his old affections seem slim, perhaps an alternative Labor leadership will see the world unblinkered by the unseemly admiration for the absentee war-hero of the Texas Air National Guard.

(Ian Williams <uswarreport@igc.org> contributes frequently to Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org) on UN and international affairs.)

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2003. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to “making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner.” For more information, visit www.fpiif.org.

Recommended citation:

Ian Williams, “Whither the Special Relationship? Bush, Blair, and Britain's Future,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, December 18, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/commentary/2003/0312bushblair.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Ian Williams

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

p. 4

www.fpiif.org

A Think Tank Without Walls

