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Race, Empire and the British-American 'Special Relationship' in the Obama Era¹

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With the election of Barack Obama, much attention in Europe has focused on the possibility of the return of the good transatlantic relations that characterised the post-war period and was seriously damaged under Bush's war on terror, unilateralism and imperialism. Much attention has also inevitably been focused on the fact that Obama is the first African-American president elected in a country that many view as historically and structurally racist. While Obama's election was seen to represent an end to both the damaging impact on transatlantic relations of the Bush era and to white supremacy in America, these two issues have rarely been connected. This chapter will look at the link between these by focusing on the "special relationship" between the United States and Britain, a relationship that has not only been the most enduring, if at times unequal and controversial, partnerships in the post-war era. Most notably between Churchill and FDR during the Second World War, Thatcher and Reagan during the Cold War and Blair and Bush during the War on Terror and invasion of Iraq. In spite of such cooperation, it is a relationship founded on colonialism and anti-colonialism, conflict and criticism – American criticism of British colonialism and, corresponding to it, British criticism of American racism. Far from representing pure anti-racism or anti-colonialism, British criticisms of American racism and American criticism of British colonialism have been deployed at crucial moments in which their relationship and relative geo-political power and influence was being contested or undergoing realignment, from the American Revolution through the cold war to the election of Obama.

This chapter will examine the British response to the election of Obama in terms of the realignment of the special relationship and the place of both race and colonialism in the discussions about Obama's election and relationship with Britain. More specifically, it will look at how this election has been celebrated in Britain as a victory over American racism, while his relationship to Britain has been criticised for his alleged anti-colonialism. I will argue that this response to Obama reflects historical and current tensions over the colonialism and imperialism of and racism in both countries, the realignment of the special

¹ I would like to thank the British Sociological Association for their support in the form of the Early Career Forum Professional Development Award which allowed me to present an early version of this paper at the conference 'The Obama Effect: Transatlantic Perspectives Past and Future', Roosevelt Study Center/Middelburg Center for Transatlantic Relations in Middelburg, Netherlands, 11/27-29/2010.

relationship *and* concerns about the image, influence and power of each country globally following the Bush-Blair years, as well as changes in the domestic politics of each country following their elections.

King's Dream, America's Election and Britain's Reaction

Following Obama's election in November 2008, the British media, political establishment and public celebrated. In banner headlines and official statements, we were told what this means for Britain, America and the world. For *The Guardian*, this was "America's Historic Verdict".² For *The Independent on Sunday* it was "A New America".³ On November 10, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown used his first foreign policy speech since the election to hail the victory as the "dawn of hope".⁴

Such headlines and statements were grandiose, dramatic and optimistic, but this was not solely about Obama as a politician or man, but what he and his election represented in the eyes of the British media, political establishment and public. It was both a repudiation of President George W. Bush and the key to the possible renewal of the special relationship between the two countries. According to Iain Martin in *The Telegraph*, the "Barack Obama victory allows Britain to love US again", and "[...] to restore a special relationship soured by the Bush administration".⁵ According to John Dumbrell, "President Bush himself was reviled outside the United States to a degree unknown in recent history".⁶ He argues that "European perspectives on the Bush administration were shaped by two concepts which, between them, came almost to define the politics of alliance in the 21st century: the concepts of unilateralism and of imperialism".⁷ These were two issues which had influenced negative feelings towards Bush and America globally, had a negative impact on America's relationships and implicated their allies, most notably Britain, and to which Obama, with his youth, intelligence, internationalism and multilateralism, was seen as the redemption and remedy.

A YouGov poll from May 2008 reported that 35% of Britons saw the US as a "force for evil".⁸ In response to the election of Obama, British support for both America and the special relationship increased. A Populous poll from November 2008 reported a 22% increase in the proportion of respondents who believed that it "is important for Britain's long-term security that we have a close and special relationship with the

² *Guardian* (2008), "America's Historic Verdict", *Guardian*, November 5, p. 1.

³ *Independent* (2008), "A New America", *Independent on Sunday*, November 9, pp. 17-31.

⁴ Wintour, Patrick (2008), "Brown's Foreign Policy Agenda for Obama", *Guardian*, November 11, p. 2.

⁵ Martin, Iain (2008), "Barack Obama Victory Allows Britain to Love US Again", *Telegraph*, November 5. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/3387760/Barack-Obama-victory-allows-Britain-to-love-US-again.html>>. Accessed 05/16/2011.

⁶ Dumbrell, John (2009), "Introduction: The Politics of Special Relationships", *America's 'Special Relationships': Foreign Policy and Domestic Aspects of the Politics of Alliance*, J. Dumbrell and A. Schaffer (eds.), London, Routledge, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Dumbrell (2009), "Hating Bush, Supporting Washington: George W. Bush, Anti-Americanism and the US-UK Special Relationship", *America's 'Special Relationships'*, p. 45.

US.”⁹ This was a staggering rise from 58% in June 2006 to 80%.¹⁰ Moreover, in June 2006, 62% of Britons wanted the next Prime Minister to be less close to Bush than Tony Blair was, whereas in November 2008, 61% wanted Blair’s successor Gordon Brown to be as close to Obama as Blair was to Bush¹¹. It was thus unsurprising that Brown called Obama a “[t]rue friend of Britain” and stated: “I Can Work With Obama”.¹²

The dramatically positive response to Obama’s election was not just about Bush, the special relationship and foreign policy, but another theme which dominated the British media – race, and more specifically American racism. If the previous eight years had been seen as a stain on America’s standing in the world and its international relationships, racism has historically been seen as a stain on and the betrayal of America’s promise and image. Obama’s election could be viewed as the redemption and the renewal of America not only following Bush, but of America’s promise from its revolutionary founding through the abolition of slavery and civil rights, in the narrative of the long and bumpy road to full liberty, equality and democracy.

According to Keith Richburg of the *Washington Post* writing in *The Observer*, after so many said that America “wasn’t ready to elect a black man as president [...]. Now the world has to rethink its image of a racist US”.¹³ According to Gordon Brown, “[t]he impression he has given of America to the world is transformative, because he is a black man who has won the presidency, who is living in the White House that was built by slaves”.¹⁴

Following the election, British headlines also highlighted the issue of race and frequently linked it to a wider American image and narrative of progress, often through the repeated use of the term “dream” to evoke both the ‘American Dream’ and Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream speech. The November 6th issue of *The Independent* proclaimed the election “America’s Dream” come true and *The Telegraph* had as its headline “The Dream Comes True”, followed by the claim that “America’s first black president completes

⁹ Ibid. p. 57.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sky News (2008), “Obama: ‘A True Friend Of Britain’”, *Sky News*, November 5.

<<http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/Politics/Gordon-Brown-Says-Barack-Obama-Is-A-True-Friend-Of-Britain/Article/20081115142792>>. Accessed 05/16/2011.

¹³ Richburg, Keith (2008), “Now the World Has to Rethink its Image of a Racist US”, *Observer*, November 9, p. 26.

¹⁴ Morris, Nigel (2009), “Brown Takes Gift to Obama and Hopes for Finance Pact”, *Independent*, March 3. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/brown-takes-gift-to-obama-and-hopes-for-finance-pact-1635891.html>>. Accessed 05/16/2011.

an epic journey begun by Martin Luther King Jr.”¹⁵ For Gary Younge in *The Guardian*, it was the “[j]ourney of generations that passed in a moment”¹⁶

In the *Guardian* article, “Momentous, spine-tingling, absurd: an election like never before”, Oliver Burkeman argued that for American voters, “[n]o longer was bigotry their bottom line”, and told readers to “[...] open a British newspaper, and you might have encountered the moving reflections of elderly black voters who could recall the era of segregation”.¹⁷ That next day, *The Independent* profiled 106 year-old African-American Ann Nixon Cooper in “Waiting more than a century for change”.¹⁸ This was accompanied by the timeline “Milestones in the history of Black America”, which began with the arrival of slaves.¹⁹

The narrative of American racial, as well as democratic, progress, redemption and renewal from the days of slavery through segregation and civil rights to the election of Obama that was emerging in these articles, which mostly ignored the continuing reality of racism and inequality for African-Americans, was most explicitly articulated by British historian Simon Schama in the “The Great Hope – Barack Obama”, published in *The Independent* on January 23, 2009:

So as he took the oath of office on the bible that Abraham Lincoln used in 1861, Obama at last began wiping clean American history of its ancient taint: the promise of equality and liberty, made by the Founding Fathers at the same time that it was denied to its slaves and their shamefully oppressed descendants. A day later, on 21 January, his government was installed on the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's great Washington speech, and Obama can now say to whoever will listen that it is truly a dream no longer postponed. All of America can be embraced

¹⁵ ObamaUK (2008), *The United Kingdom and Senator Barack Obama: 2008 Obama UK News Archives*. <<http://www.reobama.com/ObamaUK08.htm>>. Accessed 10/22/2010.

¹⁶ Younge, Gary (2008), “Journey of Generations that Passed in a Moment”, *Guardian*, November 6, p. 1. Younge also wrote (2008), *Who Are We – And Should It Matter in the 21st Century?* London: Viking-Penguin about race and identity in the age of Obama. Following the election a number of books came out examining America, its politics and racism from a British perspective (which Younge had written about previously in (1999), *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey Through the American South*, London: Picador, (2006), *Stranger in a Strange Land: Encounters in the Disunited States*. New York: New Press): Matt Frei (2009), *Only in America*, Presidential Election Edition, London: Harper Perennial, Justin Webb (2009), *Have a Nice Day: A Journey Through Obama's America*, London: Short Books, and its follow-up (2011), *Notes on Them and Us: From the Mayflower to Obama – the British, the Americans, and the Essential Relationship*, London: Short Books.

¹⁷ Burkeman, Oliver (2008), “Momentous, Spine-tingling, Absurd: An Election like Never Before”, *Guardian*, November 5, p. 6.

¹⁸ Foley, Stephan (2008), “Waiting more than a century for change”, *Independent*, November 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

in that recognition, just as all of America, those who voted for him and those who did not, was uplifted by his election.²⁰

Schama's analysis of the Obama election and themes of racial redemption and renewal were expanded upon and developed further in the book *The American Future: A History from the Founding Fathers to Barack Obama* (2009). In it, Schama argues that Obama not only brought together diverse groups of people to vote for him, but "honoured ghosts" of history, those that had suffered injustice and fought against it, including: the generations of the revolution ("a band of colonists rising up against an empire"), the generation that fought in World War Two, and the civil rights generation who chose to "sit at lunch counters and brave fire hoses and march through Selma and Montgomery for freedom's cause".²¹

It is noteworthy that Schama chose to establish a connection between the American anti-colonial revolutionaries and civil rights activists. In his previous book *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution*, first published in 2005, televised in 2008 in the run up to the election and reprinted in 2009 following Obama's inauguration, Schama tells the story of Britain's recruitment of the Loyalist African Black Pioneers to defend the Empire in the War of Independence, in exchange for their freedom and land.²² In *Rough Crossings*, Schama argues that "[...] during the Revolutionary War, there was no question that tens of thousands of Africans, enslaved in the American South, did look to Britain as their deliverer",²³ and "[h]owever awkward for the orthodox history of the founding fathers and their revolution, the genesis of African-American liberty is, then, inseparable from the British connection during and after the war".²⁴ This was the same empire in which they were enslaved and transported across the Atlantic, and the same revolutionaries that Schama has marching with Obama in *The American Future*. This is not a change of heart for Schama, nor a contradiction. Since the time of the American Revolution and independence from the British Empire, racism (e.g. slavery, segregation or inequality) has been the Achilles' heel of American claims of liberty, equality and democracy, and has often been the target of criticism from Britain, which lost a colony but asserted the moral high ground on race.²⁵

²⁰ Schama, Simon (2009), "The Great Hope - Barack Obama", *Independent*, January 23. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/presidents/simon-schama-the-great-hope--barack-obama-1482927.html>>. Accessed 05/27/2011.

²¹ Schama (2009), *The American Future: A History from the Founding Fathers to Barack Obama*, London, Vintage, p. 21.

²² Schama (2009), *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution*, London, Vintage, p. 14.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 21.

²⁵ See: Unknown Author (1942), "The Colour Problem as the American Sees It", *Current Affairs*, December, pp. 10-14; Plummer, Brenda Gayle (ed.), (2003), *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs 1945-1988*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; Smith, G. (1987), *When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain*, London, I.B. Tauris.

Britain's role in emancipation (as opposed to its racism and role in slavery and colonialism) would be re-emphasised during Obama's pre-election campaign visit to Britain in July 2008, amongst the gifts presented to him by Conservative leader, and future Prime Minister, David Cameron was a copy of Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague's biography of British Abolitionist William Wilberforce, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (2007).²⁶ The book, which held up Britain as the liberator of Africans from slavery, written by a British politician and presented by another to an African-American Presidential candidate was somewhat heavy handed on a symbolic level, selective on a historical level and misplaced on a personal one. Obama's African family were not slaves transported to America, nor liberated by the British. Instead, they were from Kenya and subjects of the British Empire, a fact that would soon become central to British criticism of him.

Obama's election not only challenged Britain's long-held view of America as a nation plagued by racism and racial conflict, but its ability to deflect from Britain's own history and legacy on race relations from colonialism and slavery to post-colonial immigration, inequality and institutional racism in the criminal justice system. As such, Obama's election not only improved America's image in Britain (and globally) in terms of American imperialism and racism, but turned the focus to the legacies of colonialism and racism in Britain. Thus, in addition to interviewing African-Americans, the British media turned to black Britons. In honour of the inauguration, *The Independent* article "New American dream shared around globe" included a section on Britain and listed Obama Day events across the country, from one held at the West Indian Centre in Chapeltown in Leeds to another held by Operation Black Vote at Millbank in London and attended by the Prime Minister and David Cameron.²⁷ While Polly Toynbee of *The Guardian* was "[...] in a Commons meeting room – where Dawn Butler, the black MP for Brent, would be launching 'Bernie's list' to promote black candidates – with crowds of mainly ethnic minority young Brent people gathered to watch Obama's speech".²⁸ *The Times* included the article "The moment is ours, now we can achieve anything, say black Britons".²⁹

On the topic of British politics, race and opportunity, Tom Geoghegan of the BBC asked "Now the US has elected its first black president, how long until the UK has a black or Asian prime minister? When Barack Obama claimed that his story could only have happened in America, he might have been looking across the Atlantic for evidence?".³⁰ Trevor Phillips, the chairman of the British Equality and Human Rights

²⁶ Macintyre, James (2008), "Cameron's a Lightweight", *New Statesman*, December 4. <<http://www.newstatesman.com/print/200812040015>>. Accessed 05/12/2011.

²⁷ Rajan, Amol (2009), "New American Dream Shared Around Globe", *Independent*, January 21, pp. 14-15.

²⁸ Toynbee, Polly (2009), "We will all remember where we were today – even in lazily cynical Britain", *Guardian*, January 20, p. 26.

²⁹ Hamilton, Fiona (2009), "The Moment is Ours, Now We Can Achieve Anything, Say Black Britons", *Times*, January 21, p. 8.

³⁰ Geoghegan, Tom (2008), "Could Britain have a Black PM?", *BBC News Magazine*, November 7 2008. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7714056.stm>>. Accessed 05/16/2011.

Commission said “If Barack Obama had lived here I would be very surprised if even somebody as brilliant as him would have been able to break through the institutional stranglehold that there is on power”.³¹

This was not the first time that this point had been made. When Tony Blair was making the case for British support for the American-led invasion of Afghanistan at the 2001 Labour Party Conference, he used Colin Powell as an exemplar of America, its virtues, values and international agenda: “I think of a black man, born in poverty, who became chief of their armed forces and is now secretary of state, and I wonder frankly whether such a thing could have happened here”.³² Not only was Blair not referring to, nor imagining an African-American President such as Obama, but through Powell, the face of American foreign policy, he was championing American racial progress in the name of the very Bush-era American imperialism that Obama was also widely perceived to be the antidote to as opposed to the cover for.

Such comparisons between the two countries in respect to race and Black leadership were the focus of Tom Clark, Robert Putnam and Edward Fieldhouse’s *The Age of Obama: The Changing Place of Minorities in British and American Society* (2010). This comparative study of racial and ethnic inequality, diversity and tolerance in Britain and America, asked whether a British Obama is possible. The authors conclude that, in spite of continuing injustice and inequality, thanks to increasing tolerance in Britain, “a British Obama cannot be ruled out”.³³

Interestingly, in spite of these authors and many commentators’ listing of prominent black British MPs who could be the British Obama or signal the development of a black political class in Britain, the most high profile candidates to get the label were neither on the list nor black: David Cameron and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg. According to Fraser Nelson in *The Spectator*, “[w]hen Barack Obama first came on the scene, his supporters called him the ‘black Blair’ [...] [b]ut is David Cameron becoming the white Obama?”³⁴ In *The Telegraph*, Toby Young argued that “Cameron positions himself as the British Obama”,³⁵ while Oliver Burkeman cast Cameron’s future coalition partner Clegg as Obama in a British version of Sheppard Fairey’s “Hope” poster in *The Guardian*.³⁶

In *Welcome to Obamaland: I Have Seen Your Future and It Doesn’t Work* (2009), James Deningpole cast Obama as an African-American Tony Blair, “another smiling candidate, speaking a new language, who

³¹ Clark, Tom, Putnam, Robert and Fieldhouse, Edward (2010), *The Age of Obama: The Changing Place of Minorities in British and American Society*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, p. 112.

³² Younge (2006), *Stranger in a Strange Land*, p. 19.

³³ Ibid. Back Cover.

³⁴ Nelson, Fraser (2008), “The British Obama?”, *Spectator*, March 2.
<<http://www.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/533416/the-british-obama.shtml>>. Accessed 06/03/2011.

³⁵ Young, Toby (2010), “Cameron Positions Himself as the British Obama”, *Telegraph*, February 28.
<<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyyoung/100027796/cameron-positions-himself-as-the-british-obama/>>. Accessed 06/03/2011.

³⁶ Burkeman, Oliver (2010), “Yes He Can!”, *Guardian*, April 20, p. 6.

convinced us all – or far too many of us – that he wasn't a dangerous socialist".³⁷ In a reversal of traditional British views of American race relations, Deningpole attacks multiculturalism, race relations, black history month and immigration in Britain, and turning to an America that he perceives as less burdened by racial and ethnic tensions, writes: "But if you're tempted to start feeling too smug and superior about this, don't be. With Obama at the helm and Democrats controlling both houses of Congress, you're about to see an explosion in just the kind of multiculturalism madness we in socialist Britain have been suffering for over a decade".³⁸

Excluding Deningpole's non-representative analysis, the discourse in which American progress in the area of racial equality and race relations serves as a measure and model for Britain was gaining increasing popularity. It was articulated again in October 2010, but this time by an American, Jesse Jackson, who not only reversed the tradition of British criticism of American racism but also of American civil rights activists, as far back as Frederick Douglas in the 1840s, travelling to Britain to campaign against racism at home. Jackson was in Britain speaking about racial profiling by the British police and said: "We've gone through this process in our country of ethnic and religious targeting [...]. Wherever it happens it undermines the moral authority of the democracy" and "[i]t damages the image of Britain".³⁹ Bringing the history of the two countries together, Jackson added that America and Britain both "have legacies of slavery and colonialism and both have been forced to end those ugly patterns and embrace democracy".⁴⁰ Yet, the spectre of British colonialism would re-emerge once Obama was elected and questions about the special relationship arose.

The First African-American President and the 'Last Anti-Colonial'

During the election campaign and even more following his victory, optimism about Obama repairing the special relationship was high in Britain. Following his meeting with Gordon Brown in July 2008, Obama said: "The prime minister's emphasis - like mine - is on how we can strengthen the trans-Atlantic relationship". He added that there is a "deep and abiding affection for the British people in America and a fascination with all things British".⁴¹

³⁷ Deningpole, James (2009), *Welcome to Obamaland: I Have Seen Your Future and It Doesn't Work*, Washington: Regnery, p. 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 141-142.

³⁹ Dodd, Vikram (2010), "Jesse Jackson Attacks British Police over Discrimination", *Guardian*, October 18, p 14. In April 2012 Jackson appeared at LA's 'Britweek', saying that he attended because of the two countries' shared history in overcoming slavery. Carroll, R. "On her majesty's silver service: LA celebrates 'Britweek'", *The Guardian*, 26 April 2012, p. 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ BBC (2008), "Obama Calls for Strong UK Links, *BBC*, July 26. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7526544.stm>>. Accessed 04/15/2011.

There were early concerns about the relationship. In *The Guardian*'s "Obama's First Day" special, Simon Tisdall questioned "[...] whether Obama believes there's anything special about Britain", noting that "the only reference to Britain in Obama's inauguration speech was his allusion to the British 'enemy' harrying George Washington's rebels as they fought for freedom".⁴² He also asked if there was more to the story:

Is it possible Obama has personal reasons for keeping the British at bay? His father's family experienced British colonial rule in Kenya and his paternal grandfather was reportedly imprisoned and tortured during the Mau Mau uprising. Britain long upheld a world order that held people like Obama down. It has long benefited from its association with Anglo-Saxon presidents who, by various and often specious means, traced their ancestry, culture, beliefs. And even their liking for whiskey and golf, back to the British Isles. Now an African-American stands where they once stood. Obama does not look like a man guided by prejudice. But if Britain's imperial past were to come back and haunt its present dealings, there might be some justice in it.⁴³

While this speculative analysis comes from the liberal-left, such arguments would soon emerge in and dominate the British right-wing media and think-tanks as the special relationship faltered. And it did, albeit on a diplomatic and symbolic level, almost immediately. The incident which received the most attention and opened the door for the argument that Obama was anti-British due to colonialism was when he first took office and returned the bust of Winston Churchill that Blair gave to Bush.

According to Tim Shipman of *The Telegraph*:

Churchill has less happy connotations for Mr Obama than those American politicians who celebrate his wartime leadership. It was during Churchill's second premiership that Britain suppressed Kenya's Mau Mau rebellion. Among Kenyans allegedly tortured by the colonial regime included one Hussein Onyango Obama, the President's grandfather. The rejection of the bust has left some British officials nervously reading the runes to see how much influence the UK can wield with the new regime in Washington.⁴⁴

When Gordon Brown travelled to New York for the opening of the UN in 2009, his first trip to the US since Obama's election, his request for a private meeting with the President was turned down. In addition to this, Brown was allegedly slighted when, in return for his gift to Obama of a pen holder crafted from the timbers of the 19th century British warship HMS Gannett (whose sister ship, HMS Resolute, provided the

⁴² Tisdall, Simon (2009), "Obama is everyone's pal – not just Britain's", *Guardian*, January 22, p. 10.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Shipman, Tim (2009), "Barack Obama sends bust of Winston Churchill on its way back to Britain", *Telegraph*, February 14. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/4623148/Barack-Obama-sends-bust-of-Winston-Churchill-on-its-way-back-to-Britain.html>>. Accessed 05/16/2011.

wood for the Presidential desk), Obama presented him with twenty-five American films on US Region 1 DVDs. It caused Nile Gardiner, Director of the Heritage Foundation's Margaret Thatcher Centre for Freedom to ask: "Does Obama have it in for Britain?", before answering his own question: "His Kenyan grandfather ... was reportedly mistreated under British colonial rule during that country's Mau Mau rebellion - an event to which he devotes 35 pages of his memoir, *Dreams From My Father*. Small wonder that his relationship with Gordon Brown borders upon the disastrous".⁴⁵

Dreams From My Father is referenced by most advocates of the anti-colonial thesis as their evidence. In it, Obama devotes part three to his trip to Kenya in 1988 in order to meet his father's side of his family and learn more about them and Kenya. He does discuss colonialism and its legacy, as well as his grandfather's job as a cook for the British Army, his imprisonment and torture by the British and his father's work as an economist in post-colonial Kenya. While he is clearly opposed to colonialism, negative views of the British attributed to Obama in the right-wing press come primarily from other people, including Sarah Onyango, his grandfather's third wife. In terms of Obama's opinions about colonialism, they are fairly conservative. During his first trip to Africa as President, Obama visited Ghana, the first African colony to gain independence from Britain. While there, he acknowledged that the legacy of colonialism had helped breed conflict in Africa, but also called on Africa to take responsibility for its post-colonial problems, arguing that "... the West is not responsible for the destruction of the Zimbabwean economy over the last decade".⁴⁶

When Cameron became Prime Minister, there were hopes that the special relationship would improve, since he and Obama shared more in common in terms of age, experience and rhetoric, and the fact that the Conservatives had been pushing a pro-American line. When they met for the first time in July 2008, Cameron is alleged to have told Obama that he would not encounter a more pro-American politician than himself. Yet, according to sources, he framed this in an anti-European argument about alleged European anti-Americanism causing Obama, a pro-EU internationalist, to express concern about Tory isolationism and links to the European far right. He also reportedly referred to Cameron as a "lightweight".⁴⁷

The Obama-Cameron relationship did not start well. On April 20, 2010, less than a month before the British general election of May 6, and the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill occurred in the Gulf of Mexico. Obama's references to

⁴⁵ Gardiner, N. (2009), "Does Obama have it in for Britain?", *Daily Mail*, December 9. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1234291/NILE-GARDINER-Does-Obama-Britain.html>>. Accessed April 15 2010. Gardiner also compiled a list of Obama's insults: (2011), "Barack Obama's Top Ten Insults Against Britain", *Telegraph* blogs, May 24.

⁴⁶ BBC (2009), "Obama Speaks of Hopes for Africa", *BBC*, July 11. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8145762.stm>>. Accessed 04/15/2011.

⁴⁷ Macintyre, James Macintyre (2008), "Cameron's a Lightweight", *New Statesman*, December 4. <<http://www.newstatesman.com/print/200812040015>>. Accessed 05/12/2011.

“British Petroleum” and Interior Minister Ken Salazar’s statement, “[o]ur job is basically to keep the boot on the neck of British Petroleum”,⁴⁸ led to accusations that Obama is anti-British. Former Conservative MP Norman Tebbit, famous for his suggestion in 1990 of a “cricket test” to determine the loyalty of immigrants, stated that “[t]he whole might of American wealth and technology is displayed as utterly unable to deal with the disastrous spill – so what is more natural than a crude, bigoted, xenophobic display of partisan political Presidential petulance against a multinational company?”.⁴⁹ While the reference to Obama being bigoted and xenophobic were clear attempts at reversing the racism in defence of a corporation, *The Daily Mail* linked his response to the BP oil spill to his grandfather’s torture.⁵⁰

In July 2010, Cameron made his first visit to America as Prime Minister and was scheduled to meet Obama to discuss Afghanistan and the oil spill. According to British commentator Adam Shaw of the *American Thinker* and *Anglo-American Debate*, the “meeting between President Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron could kill off the U.S.-U.K. ‘special relationship’ if Obama continues to indulge his anti-British prejudices”.⁵¹ Shaw then retells the story of Obama’s grandfather and speculates “[o]ne can only guess as to the effect this had on young Barack”.⁵²

The most high profile example of the anti-colonial thesis is in the work of conservative commentator Dinesh D’Souza. In *The Roots of Obama’s Rage* (2010), D’Souza argues that Obama’s ideology is anti-colonialist, is rooted in his anger at the treatment of his grandfather by the British and his absent father’s anti-colonial, anti-British, African socialist beliefs, and is evident in his economic, energy and foreign policy, particularly his view that Iraq and Afghanistan have been colonised, as well as his treatment of Britain.⁵³

The thesis also appeared in the article “Barack Obama: the last anti-colonialist” in the November 2010 issue of the British magazine *Standpoint*.⁵⁴ Addressing his British readers, D’Souza asks them to recall Obama’s “prejudice” against Britain for its colonial rule in Kenya and Churchill’s status as a champion of colonialism who was sitting Prime Minister at the time of Obama’s grandfather’s arrest, arguing that:

⁴⁸ Associated Press (2010), “Rand Paul: Obama BP Criticism ‘un-American’”, *msnbc.com*, May 21. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37273085/ns/politics-decision_2010/>. Accessed 11/25/2010.

⁴⁹ Assinder, Nick (2010), “Britain to Obama: Stop Bullying Us Over BP”, *Time*, June 11. <<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1996056,00.html>>. Accessed 11/25/2010.

⁵⁰ Brennan, Zoe and Orengh, Paul (2010), “The Real Reason President Obama Loathes the British ... His Grandfather was Tortured in a High Security Kenyan Prison”, *Daily Mail*, June 19. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1287828/Revealed-Why-President-Obama-loathes-British.html>>. Accessed 11/25/2010.

⁵¹ Shaw, Adam (2010), “Obama’s Deadly Anti-British Agenda”, *American Thinker*, July 20. <http://www.americanthinker.com/2010/07/obamas_deadly_antibritish_agen.html>. Accessed 04/15/2011.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ D’Souza, Dinesh (2010), *The Roots of Obama’s Rage*, Washington: Regnery.

⁵⁴ D’Souza (2010), “Barack Obama: The Last Anti-Colonialist”, *Standpoint*, November, pp. 34-37.

[W]hen we use the anti-colonial model we have a perfectly good explanation for Obama's hostility to Britain in general and Churchill in particular. Remove the anti-colonial model and Obama's action in removing the Churchill bust becomes inexplicable. [...].⁵⁵

He concludes by saying:

Many in Britain, I know, are deeply ambivalent about Britain's colonial legacy. But colonialism is now dead and so to is anti-colonialism. No one cares about it – except the man in the White House. He is the last anti-colonial.⁵⁶

Yet, D'Souza's claim that colonialism is dead is contradicted by the assumption that Obama's anti-colonialism will convince Britons that Obama hates a Britain that is no longer an empire, and the fact that D'Souza himself is a defender of colonialism and its legacy:

Obama may not join me, but as an Indian myself who has greatly benefited from this colonial legacy, I am quite willing to give two cheers for colonialism [...]. Hey, it's thanks to the Brits that English is my first language and that's how I was able to write this book. So while Obama fumes, I am happy to raise my glass and toast that curmudgeonly old defender of the British Empire, Winston Churchill.⁵⁷

D'Souza is not alone here. He is part of a wider group of conservative intellectuals who have, in recent years, sought to redeem empire and colonialism. Some have done so to tell of the glory days of the British Empire, its global power and influence prior to the rise of America in the post-war era, while others have done so in the name of western civilization, neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism, or all of these. In Britain, the biggest names involved in this enterprise are Niall Ferguson with *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (2003) and Simon Schama with *Rough Crossings*.⁵⁸ It was a project that started as Britain began its neo-imperialist adventures in the war on terror (as a junior partner) and really took off in response to alleged slights by Obama (with his Kenyan roots) and entered the policy arena with the election of the Tory-led coalition government in 2010. On 5 October 2010, Tory Education Secretary Michael Gove gave the speech 'All pupils will learn our island story', arguing that "One of the under-appreciated tragedies of our time has been the sundering of our society from its past", and then announced that Schama would 'advise us on how we can put British history at the heart of a revived national curriculum'.⁵⁹ The memory

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 37.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ D'Souza (2010), *The Roots of Obama's Rage*, p. 209.

⁵⁸ Ferguson, N. *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, London, Penguin, 2003.

⁵⁹ Gove, M. "All pupils will learn our island story", 5 October 2010.

<http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/10/Michael_Gove_All_pupils_will_learn_our_island_story.aspx> (accessed 15 October 2011).

and spirit of Empire would also be evoked by Cameron in his 2011 Conservative Party Conference speech. Criticising health and safety regulation, Cameron stated, “This isn't how a great nation was built. Britannia didn't rule the waves with arm-bands on”, and in relation to surviving economic hard times (and Tory austerity measures): “[...] we've been told we were finished before. They said when we lost an Empire that we couldn't find a role, but we found a role, took on communism and helped bring down the Berlin Wall”.⁶⁰

D'Souza's thesis was also taken up by former Republican Speaker of the House and future candidate for the 2012 Republican Presidential nomination Newt Gingrich, who wondered “What if [Obama] is so outside our comprehension, that only if you understand Kenyan, anti-colonial behaviour, can you begin to piece together [his actions]?”.⁶¹ As Gingrich was attempting to attract support from the Tea Party, with its revolutionary anti-colonial and anti-British historical point of reference, the Boston Tea Party, it is curious that he would criticise anti-colonialism.

For the American right, the anti-colonial thesis, with its British and African references, allows critics to apply a theory to international affairs and thereby expand the sphere of their attacks on Obama globally. It also reinforces Obama's link to Kenya and foreignness, which is attractive to the Tea Party and Birther movements. Furthermore, it joins “Muslim” as a code for not only foreignness but also Obama's racial difference. The key is both in the link to Africa and the reference, particularly in D'Souza's work, to the motif of ‘Black rage’. In a sense, Muslim and Kenyan serve as more effective labels for those opposing Obama because of the taboo of racism in America, his international background, his mixed race heritage, the fact that neither of his parents were African-American and because he was not part of the civil rights generation.

In spite of this from Gingrich and Tea Party defences of BP, the anti-colonial thesis was far more of a preoccupation for the British right. For them, it makes Britain and its historical legacy more relevant and central to developments in and debates about American foreign policy, and establishes a negative link between Obama and Britain that can be used to analyse Anglo-American relations, explain any tensions, conflicts or insults and fits within the current movement attempting to redeem empire. According to Andrew Sullivan in “Stop snivelling – America still loves us”, it may be as that Britain is not central to the political issues and challenges facing Obama, such as economic competition from China. Sullivan dismisses the claim that Obama is Anglophobic and anti-colonial: “What evidence is there that Obama is Anglophobic – his father? Please. Have you read his autobiography? He barely knew his father, let alone

⁶⁰ Cameron, D. ‘Conservative Party Conference Speech’, 5 October 2011. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/oct/05/david-cameron-conservative-party-speech?intcmp=239>> (accessed 15 October 2011).

⁶¹ Costa, Robert (2010), “Gingrich: Obama's ‘Kenyan, Anti-Colonial’”, *National Review*, September 11. <<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/246302/gingrich-obama-s-kenyan-anti-colonial-worldview-robert-costa>>. Accessed 11/30/2010.

imbibed Kenyan anti-colonialism from him. Believe it or not, most Americans have long tended to be anti-colonial; in fact, they grew up with it. You don't need an absent dead Kenyan relative to get there".⁶² In *Notes on Them and Us: From the Mayflower to Obama – the British, the Americans, and the Essential Relationship* (2011), Justin Webb argues that the removal of the bust and other alleged slights, were not intentional and nor were the Mau Mau relevant. Instead, they confirmed British fears that to America Britain is no longer relevant or important, and the special relationship no longer that "special". It is a nation which had "lost an empire and not yet found a role".⁶³

It may very well be that the British anti-colonial argument is also about connecting three moments in the decline of British global power to America: the loss of America in the Revolution, decolonisation and the end of Empire (which Kenyan decolonisation was part of) and the ascent of America in the post-war period, and the perceived sidelining of the special relationship under Obama.

Ironically, while the British anti-colonial theories were far more prevalent, the American version got the most attention. On the eve of Obama's visit to Britain in May 2011, the BBC's Mark Mardell wrote "Unpicking the logic of Obama's relationship with Europe". In it, he argued that "[the British] can dismiss from their minds the stuff from his enemies in the US - that he has inherited from his Kenyan dad a vicious Mau Mau view of the world, an out-dated communist-tinged anti-colonialism. It's nonsense".⁶⁴ Mardell then employs the anti-colonial theory alongside a wider theory of racial-cultural difference in his analysis of problems in the relationship:

After all he is not a natural Atlanticist, rather the first Pacific president - born and brought up in Hawaii with a childhood sojourn in Indonesia. He is not an East Coast white Anglo-Saxon, like most presidents before him, who saw England as the land of the Mayflower and dreaming spires. Maybe, if you've been told the British drove nails into your grandfather's private parts because they thought he was part of a rebellion, it gives you a different perspective.⁶⁵

When Obama arrived in London for his visit, he met with the Queen, had a BBQ with Cameron and became the first American president to address the UK Parliament at Westminster, where he gave a speech in which he addressed the special relationship, race relations and colonialism:

I've come here today to reaffirm one of the oldest, one of the strongest alliances the world has ever known. It has long been said that the United States and the United Kingdom share a special

⁶² Sullivan, Andrew (2011), "Stop Snivelling – America Still Loves Us", *Times on Sunday*, May 22. p. 4.

⁶³ Webb, Justin (2011), *Notes on Them and Us*, p. 19. The term "essential" in the title refers to the new name given to the relationship by Cameron and Obama in 2011.

⁶⁴ Mardell, Mark (2011), "Unpicking the logic of Obama's relationship with Europe", *BBC*, May 23. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/13506803>>. Accessed 05/27/2011.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

relationship [...]. Of course, all relationships have their ups and downs. Admittedly, ours got off on the wrong foot with a small scrape about tea and taxes [...].⁶⁶

After discussing American and British foreign policy, their relationship and role in global political leadership (e.g. in Iraq, Afghanistan and the war on terror), as well as economic leadership, Obama turned to racial and ethnic relations in a way that not only put Britain and America on equal footing but asserted a colour-blind model that denied the reality of racism in both countries:

[T]here is one final quality that I believe makes the United States and the United Kingdom indispensable to this moment in history. And that is how we define ourselves as nations. Unlike most countries in the world, we do not define citizenship based on race or ethnicity. Being American or British is not about belonging to a certain group; it's about believing in a certain set of ideals [...]. That is why there are people around the world right now who believe that if they come to America, if they come to New York, if they come to London, if they work hard, they can pledge allegiance to our flag, and call themselves American. If they come to England to make a new life for themselves, they can sing God Save the Queen just like any other citizen.⁶⁷

He then returns to the special relationship and the legacy of colonialism, attempting to both reconcile them and his family history:

[T]he example of our two nations says it is possible for people to be united by their ideals, instead of divided by their differences; it is possible for hearts to change, and old hatreds to pass; that it's possible for the sons and daughters of former colonies to sit here as members of this great Parliament, and for the grandson of a Kenyan who served as a cook in the British Army to stand before you as President of the United States.⁶⁸

In this speech, Obama attempts to neutralise suspicion about his commitment to the special relationship and Britain, as well as right-wing accusations that he is a radical or anti-colonialist. This is not dissimilar to his attempt to transcend race and continue many of Bush's imperialist foreign policies in order to neutralise accusations from the right that he is a Black radical, socialist or anti-American. By doing so, he not only fails to challenge racism and imperialism, and the relationship between them historically, but also today in his foreign policy. This speech also confirms earlier concerns about Obama and his policies, as well as the optimistic response to him in terms of race and foreign policy by British writers Tariq Ali and Paul Gilroy. For Ali, the "Obama Effect", the optimism presented by his rhetoric of hope and change and his skin

⁶⁶ BBC (2011), "Obama's speech to UK Parliament, in full, with analysis", *BBC*, May 25. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-13549927>>. Accessed 05/27/2011.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

colour, which mobilised the right and made him appear more radical, disguised the fact that his racial politics and foreign policy were ultra-moderate and he continued Bush's neo-liberal economic and imperialist policies.⁶⁹ For Gilroy, the relationship between race and Obama's foreign policy is more direct. He argues that Obama serves as a symbol and embodiment of American progress in extending rights and opportunity to racial and ethnic minorities, but like Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell before him, he is the face of America's national-security apparatus and strategy, aspects of which are "continuous with older forms of colonial warfare driven by orientalist, civilisationalist, and racist conceptions of human hierarchy and history".⁷⁰ These being historical and ongoing injustices that both Britain and America have contributed to and which Obama was supposed to end or at least repudiate, as opposed to perpetuate or deny, particularly in the former capitol of the British Empire.

⁶⁹ Ali, Tariq (2010), *The Obama Syndrome: Surrender at Home, War Abroad*, London: Verso, pp. 8-9.

⁷⁰ Gilroy, Paul (2010), *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture*, Cambridge: Belknap, pp. 172-3