

Book Review: America and Britain: Was there ever a special relationship? by Guy Arnold

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*Britain's political and military elite has for decades nurtured the idea that enduring ties bind the interests of London and Washington, in good times and bad. Irrespective of the end of the Cold War, the 9/11 attacks and the economic rise of the East, these links are allegedly impregnable. But how accurate a picture is this? Arnold's book is a thought-provoking account which stimulates much reflection on the Anglo-American relations, writes **Paul Wingrove**.*

America and Britain: Was there ever a special relationship? Guy Arnold. Hurst and Co. 2014.

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Guy Arnold's book is a critical history of the close Anglo-American relationship since 1945 – a relationship of such closeness and existing in so many dimensions that it is commonly referred to as 'the special relationship'. Arnold proceeds mainly chronologically, working from the 'Anglo' side of the equation, dealing with each premiership in turn from Attlee to Cameron, followed by some slightly repetitive thematic and reflective chapters.

We should note Arnold's intriguing subtitle: 'Was there ever a special relationship?'. Given that the book discusses the special relationship at great length this may be thought to be pushing paradox and quizzicality to the limit. Yet most commentators on the 'special relationship' have found themselves asking what – if anything – is 'special' about it, with many concluding that it is not very special at all. This was the view, for example, of a [Parliamentary Select Committee in 2010](#), which recommended (admittedly in a post-cold war context) abandoning the term. And for many others the 'special relationship' has always had something of the mystical about it – it was simply an incantation, a British delusion, a formula by which Britain convinced itself (if not the Americans) that it was 'punching above its weight' and keeping its place at 'the top table' whilst actually being in thrall to the USA. This is not a view I hold, but Arnold certainly does. Thus, whilst offering a mainly solid and well-informed account of the Anglo-American relationship since, the author's view is that it has not benefited the United Kingdom – quite the reverse: '...The special relationship appeared to fill the role of grooming Britain to become Washington's lieutenant in spreading the US hegemon' (p. 171). 'The special relationship has turned Britain into a subservient adjunct of the US imperium' (p. 178) and '...reduced Britain to the status of a US satellite...Essentially the special relationship emasculated Britain, making it more and more dependent on decisions taken in Washington' (p. 185) .



Beneath the rhetoric of Anglo-American solidarity and the frothy flights of fancy about the benefits of 'sitting at the top table', we were apparently being sold a bill of goods by an unsentimental United States which was content to let the Brits prattle on about historic links, whilst brutally pursuing its own interests. We were, in Henry Kissinger's phrase little more than 'honored consultants' to American foreign policy. In this view, British sentiment takes on American realism, but the realism wins every time.

The history is, as Arnold notes (although with limited detail), that it was Winston Churchill who bequeathed to us the 'special relationship' – founded in the practice of Anglo-American wartime co-operation, and then given sacramental status in Churchill's Fulton ('iron curtain') speech of early 1946. That speech is not always read in

proper context (indeed, I occasionally wonder if it is read at all, as opposed to simply being referred to). The contemporary version of the 'special relationship' conceives of it simply as the closest bi-lateral Anglo-American co-operation across a number of fields (military, diplomatic, intelligence, trade), eased and oiled by a shared history, culture and language, and that notion can, indeed, be found in the Fulton speech. But Churchill extended the idea greatly beyond this core, to something much broader: '...a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States of America' which would guarantee peace in the post-war world, achieving this through 'the continuance of the intimate relations between our military advisers, leading to common study of potential dangers, the similarity of weapons and manuals of instructions, and to the interchange of officers and cadets at technical colleges. It should carry with it the continuance of the present facilities for mutual security by the joint use of all Naval and Air Force bases in the possession of either country all over the world....'. Proposing such a substantial global role for the USA and the UK, Churchill recognised a conflict with the work of the embryonic United Nations and asked: 'Would a special relationship between the United States and the British Commonwealth be inconsistent with our over-riding loyalties to the World Organisation?'. His answer – 'I reply that, on the contrary, it is probably the only means by which that organisation will achieve its full stature and strength' – does not convince, but at least he saw the contradiction. However, this grand Churchillian view of the 'special relationship' has perhaps not been much in evidence since 1945 except, conceivably, in the controversial cases of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But even in its quotidian sense (the intimate bi-lateral relationship or 'hugging them close'), it is arguable, contrary to its detractors, that the 'special relationship' has produced definable benefit for the UK – for example, in terms of defence co-operation, technology and markets (Polaris and Trident notably); in intelligence sharing, and in the smaller, but significant, practices of diplomatic access and influence. And there are enough instances of the UK steering its own course against the USA to suggest that the UK is not simply imprisoned by the partnership: Attlee was reluctant to commit UK forces to support the USA in Korea, and openly laid out his differences with President Truman about Far Eastern policy; Ernest Bevin wanted an atom bomb 'with the bloody union jack on top' (and more or less got it); Anthony Eden gave little support to US policy on Indochina in 1954 and tried to sidestep the USA in the Suez adventure of 1956 (although American pressure eventually brought him to heel); Harold Wilson famously resisted President Lyndon Johnson's pressures to send ground troops to Vietnam; Edward Heath (at least initially) was not much interested in the 'special relationship' and preferred the more neutral 'natural relationship'. Of course, there are significant instances of the United States giving the 'special relationship' little weight, and brutally following its own interests. Even during the Thatcher premiership – the era of the 'Maggie and Ronnie [Reagan]' love in — the USA could pursue diplomacy and military action without being unduly troubled by the 'special relationship'. The invasion of Grenada (1983), for example, about which Britain was only informed post facto, infuriated Margaret Thatcher. And the equivocal American role in the Falkland Islands war of 1982 certainly shocked her; she had expected unwavering American support for (from her perspective) [America's closest ally](#). Subsequently the premiership of Tony Blair, it is said, showed the UK being dragged along by President Bush's policy – even if this was contrary to all Britain's diplomatic and political interests – to the point where Blair, as 'Bush's poodle', has, for many, come to embody the abject dependence of the 'special relationship'. Blair himself, of course, maintains that it was precisely the special relationship which enabled the UK to exercise a degree of restraint on a president *rampant*.

Arnold, no Atlanticist, argues that there were occasions when we should have abandoned the American alliance. But it is difficult to see, realistically, when we could have left and to where – diplomatically – we could have taken ourselves. Early in the cold war, with Germany and France laid low, and the appearance of an awkward Soviet Union on the horizon, the Atlantic alliance was the only option. The dynamics of the cold war largely worked to ensure that it remained so. (Arnold notably underplays the impact of the cold war on solidifying the alliance, I might add. Some key elements of the cold war – the Hungarian and Czech uprisings, for example – do not figure much). The aftermath of the Suez debacle, in 1956, is another possible 'exit point' for Arnold, but seems much more a time for re-building the damaged Atlantic partnership, as Macmillan did. At such a low point, choosing huffily to distance ourselves from the only super-power in the west could simply have left the UK isolated and aggrieved.

In any case, we must acknowledge that every British prime minister – with the exception of Heath – and most of the British elite, has been Atlanticist in orientation since 1945. Opting out of the special relationship was never on the table.

Arnold has, I feel, overstated the disadvantages of the special relationship for the UK. It is not surprising that we have played the role of junior partner – we were the junior partner; but given American global dominance, any partner of the USA would hold that position. Junior partner, however, does not equate to abject submission; and perhaps, in spite of the power differential, the parties rightly consider the dimensions and modalities of the relationship still sufficiently valuable and distinct to allow it to be called ‘a special relationship’ even if, in this more fragmented world, it is no longer ‘the special relationship’? Despite a perhaps overly rigid assertion of his thesis, Arnold’s book is a thought-provoking account which stimulates much reflection on the Anglo-American relations.

Paul Wingrove was formerly Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Greenwich. [Read more reviews by Paul.](#)

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