The events of 11 September 2001 in the United States, it scarcely needs to be said, had global repercussions. Even governments not renowned for their enthusiasm for American foreign policy rushed forward with statements condemning terrorism and offering condolences. The public expressions of sympathy and support, however, were arguably greater in the United Kingdom than anywhere else in the world. Although scholars have periodically argued that the ‘special relationship’ has long since expired, it appeared that 11 September again brought into the open sentiments and actions, on both sides of the Atlantic, which seemed to suggest that, after all, there was still substance in what many had supposed were tired and superannuated clichés.

In some public places the flags of the United Kingdom and the United States were flown side by side. The last night of the BBC Proms, traditionally an occasion when the mood and the music is extravagantly British, took on instead an American flavour as the BBC Symphony Orchestra under its American conductor played a different programme. Unprecedentedly, the guard outside Buckingham Palace marched to the sound of the American national anthem. Up and down the United Kingdom, there were smaller scale, but apparently deeply felt, expressions of solidarity. The British media eagerly reported that these demonstrations of support had made a deep impression in the United States and took satisfaction from this fact. The British Ambassador in Washington reported that the British Embassy had been deluged with phone calls, e-mails and letters whose authors repeated the stock-in-trade of ‘special’ sentiment, between Britain and the United States. Once again, it was said, in an hour of crisis, it was clear that the American people had no truer friend than ‘the Brits’. The islanders would stand by them, shoulder to shoulder, as they had done in the past, whatever might lie ahead.

The rhetoric of the British Prime Minister and his evident eagerness in September 2001 to go in person to the United States confirmed the strength of this alignment. The reception he received at the highest levels on his arrival seemed to confirm that the United Kingdom was indeed that true friend who could be trusted to match words with deeds in a ‘war against terrorism’. The same readiness to act

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could perhaps not be said for other sympathetic visitors. The Brits, it seemed, after all, were still ‘special’.
Such high expressions of fidelity contrasted oddly with the predominant tone of British media comment in the wake of the election of George W. Bush as President. Then, it had been widely supposed that this ‘ignorant’ Texan would have little inclination to play the old tunes. Pundits supposed that he knew very little about Europe – and that meant Britain, too, because his administration would simply look at a map and suppose that Britain was just one other European country. He would be so obsessed with East Asia and Latin America that he would have no time for the old ties that bound. This was a new world and a new century and hard-headed British commentators declared (using an Americanism) that it was time for the British government and the British people to ‘get real’. Did not George W. Bush, more versed in Spanish than in Oxford English (the President’s shaky syntax was a source of endless superior amusement in the British satirical press) declare that the United States had a ‘special relationship’ with Mexico? There were quite probably many other countries similarly favoured ahead of the United Kingdom. The political complexion of the new administration would also rule out that ideological alignment between Clintonian Democracy and Blairite New Labour which could vaguely be said to have existed. Put together, such points seemed very convincing to much of Britain’s political class and to rule out what in fact actually happened in September 2001.

September 2002

One year on, as this article is completed, the mood appears to have shifted again. British-American co-operation and joint activity in Afghanistan was co-ordinated. British support for the ‘war on terrorism’ was strong and a British military commitment alongside the United States caused few problems for the British government. The way in which the war was covered in the British media even left the impression that only Britain had matched words with deeds. Needless to say, in such a complicated conflict operational disagreements surfaced but they do not appear to have substantially damaged the impression that the Americans and the British were working very closely together – ‘just like old times’. However, as attention has begun to shift to the issue of Iraq, it appears to be the case, at the public level, that the initial unity of sentiment and policy, stemming as it did from the response in Washington and London to 11 September, has come under stress. The reaffirmation of the ‘special relationship’ made so publicly in September 2001 cannot, it would appear, be taken for granted no matter whatever precise circumstances may obtain. It would be foolish at this point to speculate on what might or might not happen in the future – and by the time of publication a war between the United States and Iraq may already have occurred or be in immediate prospect – but it seems clear that at this juncture a substantial section of British opinion, perhaps a majority, remains to be convinced that British involvement in such a war would be prudent. However, that has not stopped the British Prime Minister making clear his intention to stand with the United States and he has given at least the appearance of being the foreign leader to be most closely consulted by Washington and to be involved, to some extent, in American decision-making. This intimacy has led some commentators to look back to 1941-1945 and the extraordinary British-American military and political co-ordination in those years. It would be tempting, but too simple, to suppose that nothing had changed. So, what’s so special about the ‘special relationship’? What is substance and what is ‘spin’? Does the ‘reality’ contrast with the ‘myth’ or is the ‘myth’ itself part of the ‘reality’?
The relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom is, in one sense, ‘just another’ example of a bilateral relationship between states. All such relationships operate at different levels — from formal inter-governmental communications on the one hand to direct person-to-person contacts at another, with a host of intermediate connections. Together, all these elements constitute a network of ‘players’ with varying degrees of influence and depth. All bilateral relationships between ‘states’ and ‘people’ have these characteristics, to greater or lesser degree. The US/UK relationship is not ‘special’ in their existence. However, what arguably does make it ‘special’ is the scale and range of these connections. They are in turn rooted in a long and complicated history. These factors combine to produce a situation where images of each other, both positive and negative, are unusually widely shared (when compared with the host of bilateral relationships in the modern world) both at the elite and popular levels. On the one hand, there have been such bodies as the Pilgrim Society, the English Speaking Union and the Rhodes Trust, which have played a strong role in cementing cross-Atlantic relationships. There have also been strong connections between universities. On the other hand we might instance the impact of American singers in Britain and British singers in the United States. Any full account of this relationship – which cannot be attempted here – has therefore to present it as a rich totality.

Further, so dense are these connections that the historical profession may itself be caught up in ‘myth-making’ because many historians of these issues have themselves become ‘Anglo-American’ in their personal circumstances. Professor Donald Cameron Watt in 1984 remarked on some colleagues for whom the differences and conflicts which have existed in British-American relationships are “barriers to the proper understanding, as they conceive it, of the unique nature of those relationships and which are therefore to be ignored where possible, and minimized where not.” So strong was the influence of such a group of ‘Anglo-American’ historians that it sometimes provoked opposite responses which highlighted disagreement and were sceptical of any ‘special relationship’ as a real factor in international politics. Particular contributions in this volume make it clear that there were indeed Anglo-American differences, sometimes quite sharp ones, and they should not be glossed over in a ‘special’ haze. Yet the fact that they have existed does not in itself mean that there is nothing ‘special’ at all.

We are emphatically not talking about a bilateral relationship which is ‘just like’ any other. We are talking about two countries whose history might almost be seen as a single history. Contemporary British and American historians have wrestled with the problem of trying to characterize the Englishness or Britishness of the First British Empire in North America. Of course, the American War of Independence was a war to throw off British hegemony and forge a new nation with institutions and political ideas which would be emphatically different from a ‘motherland’ which was being spurned.

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On the other hand, as some historians have recently re-emphasized, the conflict was a kind of pan-Atlantic civil war – one might almost say in some aspects a re-run of the ideological conflicts of the mid-seventeenth century in the British Isles. Thus there were American sympathizers in Britain as there were ‘Empire Loyalists’ in North America. Debates about religion and politics on both sides of the Atlantic then, and subsequently, could draw upon many of the same books and their authors not infrequently crossed the ocean (in both directions). When, in the subsequent century it came to the great conflict of the American Civil War there were British supporters of the North and British supporters of the South. How ‘democracy’ developed in the United States was used by supporters of franchise reform in Britain as a shining example and by opponents as a dire warning. Many comparable examples of interaction could be given. Collectively, they suggest a continuing high degree of mutual awareness. Of course many other countries were interested in the development of the United States and it was not only in Britain that Americans were interested. It is the degree which is exceptional, though unsurprising.

So, when a contemporary Guardian journalist, Jonathan Freedland, writes a book urging the British to ‘live the American dream’ by abolishing the monarchy and creating an American-style republic, he is only echoing opinions expressed in the late eighteenth century and at recurrent intervals ever since. Naturally, Conservative supporters of constitutional monarchy have little enthusiasm for such a transplant operation and have continued to look with some dismay at the world of American politics – but then proceeded to copy some of its techniques. In the twentieth century, however, there have been others on the Left for whom an American republic has not been the object of their dreams. They have looked instead to Socialism or Communism. All of these assessments are but crude summaries of complex enthusiasms and equally complex dislikes. It would be simplistic to lump all the Left in one camp and the Right in another. The extent of ‘Anti-Americanism’ is discussed elsewhere in this volume but ‘pro-Americanism’ demands comparable consideration.

A Question of Power

In emphasizing the complex historical interpenetration of the two countries, however, we might be too easily slipping into a mythology which has been repeated, generation after generation. The relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom has inescapably been forged in the ‘real world’ of power. Its twists and turns, naturally, cannot be simply seen in a bilateral context. How they have related to each other has depended, in large measure, on their perception of their needs when viewed in a global context. It was by no means a foregone conclusion that those interests and perceptions would coincide. Moreover, the extent to which the twentieth century witnessed ‘America in Britain’s Place’ could not fail to produce psychological complications. It might be best that the ‘Pax Americana’ should follow ‘Pax Britannica’ than that any other power or group of powers should establish a hegemonic ‘Pax’ in the world – but the fact of its doing so was by no means universally palatable. There was some talk of an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ partnership which would dominate the world but it proved difficult to translate into practical politics.
At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British political elite was not reconciled to the view that a ‘Pax Americana’ would be inevitable because it did not accept that British ‘decline’ was inescapable. Few would have supposed then that by 1916-17, in the circumstances of a world war, Britain would be totally dependent on American financial support. During that war, relationships almost inevitably fluctuated. In some quarters in 1914 and thereafter there was anger that the United States had not seen from the outset that the cause of the Allies was transparently just and intervened from the outset. Others suspected or feared that if the United States had intervened from the outset it would early come to dominate and determine the outcome of the war. British propaganda in the United States emphasized, with some skill, that the two countries shared the same values. The entry of the United States into the war in 1917 – though as an ‘associated power’ rather than a formal ally – naturally produced a very different context. Its crucial role in the final stages of the war was grudgingly acknowledged, but suspicious politicians suspected that the United States would necessarily now exercise its power on the world stage in a novel fashion. Others, however, saw in President Wilson a true standard-bearer of shared British-American liberal values and aspirations – in such matters as the League of Nations. In the event, almost all expectations were not met. Neither the fears nor the hopes of different sections of British opinion concerning the policy of the United States were realized in the manner anticipated.

It is not surprising, therefore, that there was a deep and unresolved tension in the relationship between London and Washington between 1919 and 1939. There was a disjuncture between the apparent ‘absence’ of the United States from a prominent position in world politics and the evident growth of American power. The British Empire reached its greatest territorial extent after 1919. Notwithstanding its increasing internal problems, particularly in India, and the aspirations of the ‘Dominions’, it still seemed a plausible operation, at least if you confined yourself to looking at the map. Speaking generally, in the 1930s, British governments oscillated between wanting to make sure that the United States was ‘on side’ as the European picture darkened, expressing irritation that there seemed little prospect of direct support and hoping that such support would never be necessary.

The advent of war naturally changed the position. As in 1914-17, so in 1939-41, there were mixed sentiments. There were some who harboured the darkest suspicions – believing that the United States was content to see Britain further weakened. Others, while recognizing that direct American intervention would be unlikely, nevertheless stressed the importance of cultivating the best possible relationship. The advent of Churchill to power in 1940 changed the emphasis. Churchill in his own person might be said to embody all the divergent elements in the British-American relationships. His mother was an American. Over the previous decade he had made a point of visiting the United States – not simply for financial reasons. He had a strong belief in the British Empire. Sometimes he felt it had to be protected from the Americans. Sometimes he looked to ‘the English-speaking peoples’. In the circumstance in which he found himself, however, he saw no alternative but to court Roosevelt. He had a firm awareness of the reality of American industrial power and its military potential. What the Prime Minister did at one level was replicated elsewhere. Proposals for a Federal Union of the
Democracies of the North Atlantic appeared. Once the United States did come into the war, the partnership developed an extraordinary unity. Needless to say, however, that did not extend to all areas of policy or strategy. Once again, however, to make that observation does not nullify the notion of a ‘special relationship’. By the end of the war it is arguable that the degree of intimacy between Britain and the United States reached a level which it is hard to match amongst alliance partners in war time.

Even so, there could be no doubt which country held the upper hand. The United States was the power-house. It was quite clear to Americans that they were not fighting to hold the British Empire together. Churchill could pronounce that he had not become the King’s First Minister to preside over the liquidation of that Empire, but the preponderant American sentiment was that there was no place for imperialism in the society of nations. Steadily, British ministers and representatives had to come to terms with the fact that Washington would not take second place. If Britain in the future was to play a part either as a European or a World Power that could only be as part of a wider organization – Eden in January 1943 was referring to the embryonic discussions about a United Nations Organization.

There were, not surprisingly, many specific matters where the two governments did not see eye to eye. There was British alarm, for example, at the extension of American interest in Middle East oil and the encroachment on a British sphere of influence. One further example of the shifting balance of power can be seen with regard to the development of the atomic bomb. British scientists and refugee scientists in Britain had done much of the pioneering work but only the United States could provide the resources to ensure successful completion of the enterprise. American governmental opinion oscillated between an acceptance of the need to help Britain recover at the end of the war and a desire to make sure that the British could not resume their pre-war role in the world. A report from the British Embassy, written near the end of the war, perceived that Washington was moving away from thinking of an equal relationship between the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union and was instead envisaging a new order of things ‘in which Great Britain, whilst occupying a highly important position and the bastion of Western European security and as the focal point of a far-flung oceanic system’ would nevertheless be expected to take her place as a junior partner in an orbit of power predominantly under American aegis. In the aftermath of victory, however, the British public was not yet ready to accept such subordination.

Face to Face

There was another level of contact below the level of high politics and diplomacy. Between 1942 and 1945, some three million Americans passed through the United Kingdom. Most of them were young men uprooted and transplanted to a new country. This was an ‘occupation’ without parallel in modern British history. The historian of this extraordinary period has brought out its full complexity and, in choosing the title ‘Rich Relations’, David Reynolds has cleverly brought out the

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ambiguity of the situation. In one sense, in this encounter, the relationships were 'rich' in the sense that efforts were made to emphasize common heritages but it was also the case that the GIs simply seemed so much 'better-off' in the austerity of wartime Britain. It soon became evident, whatever might be said rhetorically, that the Americans and the British were far from being 'the same'. There was a sense, too, in which the Americans in Britain, with different ethnic backgrounds and drawn from all parts of a vast country, became ever more 'American' in a foreign land. The British in turn came to realize just how different these Americans were. It was an encounter between the two countries which was, in many respects, remarkably harmonious in all the circumstances but it was nevertheless one which blew away at a direct personal level any notion in Britain that all Americans were 'just like us' (and vice versa).

We may therefore attempt this summary of the relationship as it existed in 1945. The war had brought the two countries together in ways that reaffirmed the depth but also the complexity of their relationship. It became transparent that it was not one which could any longer be based upon 'Anglo-Saxon kinship'. Their commitment to common political ideals as enshrined in the Atlantic Charter may, in retrospect, seem a little tarnished in execution – but was nevertheless a plausible outcome of the commonalities of their political histories. The examination of specific post-1945 aspects of the relationship in this volume makes it clear that there were continuing incompatibilities and conflicts of interest. British and American policy diverged in relation to the Middle East, China, Suez, Vietnam to mention only some of the more substantial disagreements.

Of these, it was the Suez crisis of 1956 which exposed in a dramatic and brutal fashion (from a British perspective) what happened if a friend and ally of the United States 'stepped out of line'. British pretensions to be able to act independently were stripped bare. For some, at the time, it was the moment when the 'special relationship' came to an end. The fact that it was Eisenhower, wartime 'buddy', who plunged in the dagger seemed to confirm that interpretation. One can indeed place great emphasis on 1956 as the 'moment of truth' when 'reality' replaced 'myth'. What is noteworthy, however, is that rather than dwelling sourly on 'the end of an affair' Macmillan skilfully set out to revitalise the myth. He was able to draw upon his own wartime experiences. As Donald Cameron Watt has put it, Macmillan found "a rhetorical fiction which, by flattering both sides, would reconcile both British and American elite opinion to the change of relationship." His portrayal of the British as Greeks in relation to the American Romans was an extraordinarily successful way of portraying the special relationship in the new realities – even if it was unduly flattering to the British. It would, nevertheless, be an exaggeration to suppose that the invocation of this metaphor solved everything. For some, on both sides of the Atlantic, it solved nothing.

When he delivered his celebrated lectures in 1981, Professor Cameron Watt expressed the view that the old 'special relationship' appeared to be at an end, to have gasped its last in 1970 or thereabouts. He thought there remained a residual

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3  D.C. WATT, op.cit., p. 135.

predisposition of each country towards the other. He came to what he called the ‘melancholy conclusion’ that the policy-makers in the United States had played a major part in bringing about the decline of Britain, though he added that those who saw that decline consummated did not understand what they had been doing and regretted it when they came to do so. He concluded that the restoration of Britain to the position of ally and critic of the United States on a basis of equality of strength and achievement or esteem had to be counted as ‘a historical impossibility’. There were Anglo-American families, friendships and intellectual relationships which might be counted ‘special’ but, in contrast to them, the failure of the policy-making elites on both sides of the Atlantic to achieve a similarly durable political relationship was the more striking and the more regrettable.

**Something Taken for Granted**

Twenty years on, it does not appear that a ‘historical impossibility’ has occurred. The United Kingdom does not stand on a basis of equality of strength and achievement with the United States. In 1944, the economist Maynard Keynes, amidst the tensions occasioned by debates on the future of Lend-Lease, wrote that if his own countrymen could control their well-founded suspicions and exasperations, and overlook the inevitable jealousies, unwarrantable aggrandisements and indefensible intrusions on the part of the Americans, the relationship would become in due time what he called a decent, commonplace and workaday affair, something which was taken for granted. Over much of the time, over subsequent decades, that condition could be said to have arrived. Yet, to return to the present where this article began, it would appear that circumstances have to a considerable degree seen a return of that esteem which he thought had disappeared. The current closeness of the two governments and, to some degree, of the two peoples is perhaps paradoxically because Britain, having lost an empire, has still not found a role as Dean Acheson so famously remarked. Or perhaps one should say that British governments and the British people have shied away from the full embrace of that European role which many commentators, over decades, have supposed was the role which Britain should find. The concept of Britain ‘punching above its weight’ as the bridge between ‘America’ and ‘Europe’ has remained attractive for reasons which have some plausibility. From time to time this has created false impressions of importance and its precise significance has fluctuated according to circumstances, but it has given a fresh injection to the concept of a special relationship.

It has been very apparent, however, that the role of ‘bridge’ or ‘go-between’ is frequently a stressful one. Moments come when Britain’s ‘partners’, be they American or European, come to a parting of the ways. The go-between may unwillingly be compelled to choose between friends in moments of international tension. It may be that the crisis over Iraq may be one such moment. If so, it would be rash to predict what will be the faultlines in the British body politic. At such a moment, the schizophrenic nature of the British-American relationship will again come out into the open. The special relationship may finally expire in the twenty-first century or unexpectedly regain significance. It is because in its ups and downs, as sketched in this overview, the ‘special relationship’ is both one between states and one between peoples, to a degree which is highly unusual even in a globalised
world, that makes it difficult to forecast what the outcome might be if it were put to the test. The two aspects in turn play upon each other when it comes to policy formation and reception. The populations of both countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century are very different in composition from what they were at the beginning of the twentieth century – when there was talk of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ world hegemony. It is now a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural United Kingdom which relates to a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural United States. However, despite the vast change which that fact represents, it is the case, or so we read, that when President George W. Bush is in need of inspiration and encouragement it is upon the portrait of Winston S. Churchill that he gazes.