



**PAIS Graduate Working Papers
Number 05/06**

**The Anglo-American Hegemony:
From Greater Britain to the Anglosphere**

Andrew Gamble

The Iraq War in 2003 is already being seen as a defining moment in British politics, both for its impact on domestic politics and the fortunes of the parties and of particular political leaders, and also as signalling a possible turning point in British foreign policy. The only previous episode that appears to rival it in the last sixty years is the invasion of Suez which the British undertook with the French in 1956, without American support or knowledge. The two episodes have more dissimilarities than similarities, but they do raise a common question, why do political leaders take the decisions they do? Donald Watt once argued that the key problem to investigate in foreign policy was ‘why at given moments in time identifiable individuals in positions of power, authority or influence chose, recommended or advocated one course of action rather than another.’¹ In relation to Iraq there appears to be a puzzle. How did the leaders of a British Labour Government come to take the decision to stand shoulder to shoulder with a Republican US administration and participate in the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a decision which has been so costly for the domestic support of the government, for the career of its leader, and for its international reputation?

It is not as though there was no warning of the risks the Government was running. These were signalled very clearly. In March 2003 the Government allowed the first ever vote in the House of Commons on a decision to go to war. This produced the largest ever rebellion in the Parliamentary Labour Party. 139 Labour MPs joined with the Liberal Democrats and a few dissident Conservatives to vote against the Government. With support from the Conservatives the Government won the vote by 346 votes to 217. This was the biggest parliamentary rebellion by supporters of the government party since the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. It was accompanied by the biggest ever demonstration in London, which drew between one and two million demonstrators to the capital.²

The vote in Parliament indicated an unprecedented degree of isolation of the Prime Minister from his party. Public opinion was divided before the conflict started, with a majority in favour of action but only if it took place under UN auspices, and an even larger majority wanting to give the UN weapons inspectors more time. Once British troops were engaged, opinion moved quite strongly in support of the action, reaching a peak at the time of the fall of Baghdad, but support quickly fell away once the shambles of reconstruction in Iraq and the scale of the insurgency became clear. Britain was also isolated from many of its most important European allies, in particular Germany and France, both of whom refused to support the British and American position in the UN security council. Even where some European leaders supported the action, as did Spain and Italy, polling evidence showed that European public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to what the United States and Britain were doing.

This was all the more surprising because the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, had often been criticised in his approach to many issues, such as whether Britain should join the euro, of trimming and excessive caution, accommodating preferences rather than shaping them³, conducting government by focus group and the dark arts of triangulation, learnt from Bill Clinton’s new Democrats. But on foreign policy, particularly over Iraq, and also over some other earlier issues, Tony Blair deployed a new language of conviction and right, and appeared prepared to defy his party, public opinion, and his European allies, believing that he was right and they were wrong.⁴ This was recklessness on a grand scale.

The scale of this recklessness and the political costs to Blair and to the Labour Government may be glimpsed by examining some of the polling evidence. It is true, as noted above, that public opinion did move in favour of the war once British troops were engaged, but the deepening entanglement of the US and British forces in an ever-worsening situation,

¹ Donald Cameron Watt, *Succeeding John Bull: America in Britain’s Place* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984).

² John Kampfner, *Blair’s Wars: A Liberal Imperialist in Action* (London: Free, 2003).

³ Colin Hay, *The Political Economy of New Labour* (Manchester: MUP, 1999).

⁴ Kampfner, *Blair’s Wars*.

the failures to discover any weapons of mass destruction (the ostensible reason for the military action), the steady growth of the insurgency, and the widening of the war to other areas, particularly Afghanistan, and the willingness of Al-Qaeda and its sympathisers to launch attacks in many parts of the world, including Jordan, Indonesia, Turkey, Madrid, and London, have led to a steady shrinking of support (See Table 1).

The speed with which opinion turned against the Government and against British involvement in Iraq can be seen from attitudes to the Black Watch incident in October 2004 reported by YouGov. At the request of the Americans the Black Watch regiment was deployed near to Baghdad to allow US troops to be released for a major counter-insurgency push. The strength of opinion against this deployment was extraordinary, given that Britain and the US were allies. 63 per cent of the sample in the YouGov poll opposed the deployment of the Black Watch, and 65 per cent thought that the Government should refuse further US requests. 56 per cent thought the deployment was solely to do with the closeness of the US election, 68 per cent thought that Blair was too close to Bush. 75 per cent refused to believe the Government's assurances that the deployment was temporary and that the Black Watch would return home before Christmas. (in fact the Black Watch sustained no casualties, the deployment was a short one, and the regiment did return home by Christmas). But that did not influence the hostility of public opinion towards Britain's involvement in Iraq, and specifically to its association with the United States. 53 per cent in October 2004 wanted all British troops to be withdrawn, 62 per cent were pessimistic about the future of Iraq, and 60 per cent thought that the war had increased the threat of terrorism.⁵ This was before the terrorist attack in London nine months later.

The same poll showed the depth of distrust with all British political and US leaders (this was just before the US presidential election between George Bush and John Kerry). 78 per cent of the sample said that they not much or no confidence at all in George Bush. For Tony Blair the figure was 57 per cent. But for Michael Howard, the Conservative Leader, it was slightly higher – 59 per cent. Charles Kennedy, the Liberal Democratic Leader who had supported the war while British troops were in action, but had become a critic of the war since, scored 55 per cent, and John Kerry 47 per cent. The gulf which the war in Iraq had opened up between the voters and the political class was very clear.

A different scenario

Instead of what actually happened let us imagine a different, but not implausible scenario. After the events of 9/11 Britain along with several other countries joins the UN sanctioned US coalition in Afghanistan to destroy the Al-Qaeda training camps and dislodge the Taliban regime which was giving them safe haven. However after that had been successfully accomplished, the British Government rejects the case for intervention in Iraq, on a number of related grounds (all of them rehearsed at the time): that there was no proven threat; that Saddam was being successfully contained by the sanctions regime; that there were much more urgent priorities, such as finding a settlement for the Israel/Palestine conflict; that the risks of failure were very high; and that UN support was highly unlikely. The consequence of taking this position would have been that Britain would have either abstained or voted with France and Germany on the Security Council, if the United States had sought UN approval for its actions. The Government's decision would have been attacked by the Conservative party, then led by Iain Duncan Smith, but would have been very popular in the Labour party and in the country. The Atlanticists within the Government and within the political class would have been isolated, and the Government and the Prime Minister would have received a boost in popularity. Their position would have been further strengthened by the course of events after the invasion. In 2005 without any of the embarrassments caused by

⁵ YouGov 26-28 October 2004. *Daily Telegraph*. Iraq, British and US Politics, 29/10/2004.

the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, the mounting death toll in Iraq, and the death of the Government scientist, Dr David Kelly, Labour would probably have won a new landslide election victory in May 2005, instead of the narrow victory with a much reduced share of the vote that it did in fact achieve. Tony Blair would never have made his pledge to step down sometime before the next election, and in 2006 would have been heading for a fourth term instead of resignation. Freed from a close association with George Bush and the United States, Blair would have been free to make a new opening to the EU and to affirm for the first time since Edward Heath that relationships with the EU took priority over those with the United States.

Such a scenario is not so hard to imagine. It does not even require a British Gaullism, simply a British Shroederism. To put the question another way, why is Britain not part of old Europe? In the run-up to the war Donald Rumsfeld famously castigated the opponents of the United States on Iraq as 'Old Europe': 'You're thinking of Europe as Germany and France. I don't. That's old Europe...but you look at the vast numbers of other countries in Europe. They're not with France and Germany on this, they're with the United States.' The question is why was Britain not with France and Germany on this issue? Why was Britain with the United States?

The poodle problem

One solution to this problem, popular in the media, is to describe British political leaders as poodles in relation to American Presidents. The term is intended to convey that British Prime Ministers are subservient, docile, craven, and fawning when they deal with American Presidents. The term was first applied by Denis Healey, to describe the relationship between Thatcher and Reagan, and it has been used repeatedly to characterise the relationship between Bush and Blair. The term however rather begs the question. Why *should* Britain act the poodle to the United States? Certainly there has been a strong relationship between the two states since the 1940s, and one that stretches further back, though with some breaks, to the beginning of the twentieth century. Winston Churchill used the phrase 'the special relationship' in his 1946 Fulton speech, which is more often remembered for his phrase about the iron curtain descending across Europe.⁶ Britain has also been called the 51st state, or a US aircraft carrier (because of the US airforce bases Britain allowed to be established on its soil).⁷ The unusual closeness between these two state has been such in the recent past that Nelson Mandela even described the British Prime Minister during the build-up to the Iraq War as the US foreign minister.

If even a fraction of these jibes are true how can it be explained? There are a number of obvious explanations, all of which turn out on examination to be inadequate

US Power?

The first explanation is that the United States wields such military, economic and financial power that it can bend any state to its will, including Britain. Examples that are often cited include the Suez episode, when the invasion was halted, just short of its objectives, because of US orchestrated pressure on sterling, and the IMF episode in 1976, when the Treasury had to negotiate a large loan from the IMF and accept stringent cuts in public expenditure as the price for regaining financial stability.⁸ Another example is that Britain has been directly

⁶ Randolph Churchill, (ed) *The Sinews of Peace: post-war speeches/Sir Winston Churchill* (London: Cassell, 1948).

⁷ Duncan Campbell, *The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier: American military power in Britain* (London: Michael Joseph, 1984).

⁸ Kenneth Morgan, *Britain since 1945: The People's Peace* (Oxford: OUP 1990).

dependent upon the United States for its nuclear deterrent since the late 1950s, when it proved no longer able to bear the cost of maintaining its own. It is suggested that whenever the United States needs British compliance it can threaten either financial blackmail or nuclear blackmail.⁹

There is no doubt that the relationship has been close. British Prime Ministers enjoy being America's closest ally, and the contribution of bases, and the sharing of intelligence and military contributions give it some real substance. But Britain is not ultimately dependent upon the United States, any more than is France or Germany. Britain has sixty million people, it is still one of the largest economies in the world, it has significant armed forces and other assets, so the idea that except in very particular circumstances, The United States could force Britain to do something it was unwilling to do is mostly fanciful. If the United States could not coerce other members of the Security Council into voting for the war on Iraq, many of them much more obviously dependent upon the US than Britain, then it is hard to see why it could force Britain to do something against its interest. Britain's participation in the coalition of the willing is very much as one of the willing rather than the unwilling,¹⁰ and the United States has no effective means of changing the minds of Britain's political leaders, if they choose not to be so compliant.

British Interests

A second explanation is that Britain invaded Iraq because vital British national interests were at stake. An old assumption of British foreign policy was that the British people would not willingly go to war unless there were. However it is hard to see in the case of Iraq what they might be. A succession of former Foreign Secretaries from both parties – Robin Cook, Denis Healey, Douglas Hurd, and Kenneth Clarke – all expressed scepticism that there was any vital *British* interest which could justify the invasion of Iraq. The obvious candidates are oil, weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, but the case was not compelling for any of them, and the war has done little to secure them. No weapons of mass destruction were found, and no evidence of links between Saddam and the sponsorship of terrorism. The war has however succeeded in increasing the threat from terrorism throughout the world, by providing a new cause, a new injustice, and the opportunity for Al-Qaeda to participate directly in the insurgency against the occupying forces.¹¹

The situation in Iraq today could not have been foretold in every detail. But many of the likely costs and risks were known in advance, and many analysts reasoned that they outweighed the likely benefits. The balance seemed to come down strongly on the side of caution, the kind of prudential foreign policy which the British had habitually pursued. Even some of those who were in favour of toppling Saddam concluded that this was the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time. The British on their own would never have proposed a military invasion of Iraq. After Afghanistan the British priority was Palestine, but this was abandoned once the Bush administration had declared that its priority was Iraq. Several members of the Bush administration argued openly for regime change, but this was not officially a British position, even though several British ministers, including Tony Blair, had in the past supported intervention in the affairs of other states on humanitarian grounds. But the language of regime change and democracy and human rights was far removed from a traditional view of foreign policy based on interests.

State Institutions

⁹ Tony Benn, *Parliament, People and Power: Agenda for a free society* (London: Verso, 1982).

¹⁰ Peter Riddell, *Hug Them Close: Blair, Clinton, Bush and the Special Relationship* (London: Politico's 2003).

¹¹ Kampfner, *Blair's Wars*.

A third explanation focuses on the nature of the two states and the way in which certain sectors of each state have become remarkably intertwined, ever since there was joint military command established between the two countries during the Second World War. The establishment of extensive and interlocking networks covering the military, intelligence, diplomatic, and political communities, is matched by looser business, cultural and academic networks. The closeness of the British military and intelligence communities has given rise to suggestions that the options for British political leaders are foreclosed, and that the advice they receive is already heavily weighted in favour of supporting the United States, whatever the British national interest might be. A British Prime Minister has on this reading to be extremely brave and independent to break with the consensus within the British Government on what is sensible and responsible policy.

These networks are certainly formidable, and are undoubtedly one of the many institutional means through which the special relationship is sustained and expressed. But they are not irresistible. Prime Ministers and their Cabinets could still choose to overrule them, and in the past sometimes have. Eden notoriously did not consult the Americans when he joined with France and Israel to attack Egypt in 1956; Harold Wilson refused American requests to send a token British force to fight in Vietnam, even though he gave verbal support to the war; and Edward Heath shocked Nixon and Kissinger by the stance he took over the Yom Kippur War, refusing to give permission for US airfields to be used in support of Israel, and insisting that any American request would first have to be cleared with Britain's EU partners.¹² If the networks were so powerful then it is hard to see how these decisions were ever taken, especially since the cold war was at its height. It seems counter-intuitive to argue that the power of these networks has increased since the end of the cold war. The end of communism in Europe might be thought to have liberated British foreign policy rather than shackled it even closer to the United States.

Personalities

A fourth explanation puts it all down to the personalities of particular leaders. The personal chemistry, shared religious convictions between Bush and Blair is sometimes cited to suggest that starting with the Colgate summit in 2001, Bush and Blair developed a personal rapport which subsequently overrode more normal calculations of British national interest. Variants on the same theme popular with satirists is that Bush is ignorant and Blair insane, or at least deluded.

Personal attributes are no doubt important, but are easily exaggerated. They cannot be a sufficient explanation of the decisions that were taken over Iraq, not least because in Tony Blair's case they fit into a pattern of decisions, over Kosovo and Sierra Leone, with a different president, and even more importantly, they fit into a long liberal/Labour traditions of Atlanticism and liberal interventionism stretching back (some of them) over more than a hundred years. The real challenge in understanding the decisions that were taken over Iraq is not to focus on the foibles of leaders, fascinating though these may be, but to look at the historical context and the historical precedents. When this is done Blair does not really stand out. He is part of a long Labour Atlanticist tradition, going back to Ernest Bevin and the founding of NATO.

Britain's role in the world

To explain the depth of the Atlanticist tradition in Britain, and how it continues to shape British foreign policy it is necessary to look at the development of British foreign policy over

¹² David Dimbleby & David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: the relationship between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (London: BBC books, 1988).

the last hundred years. What is immediately apparent is that Atlanticism has not always been as strong as it has been in the last sixty years.

One hundred years ago. The focus of British concern was still the British Empire. It was fundamental both for British identity and for how Britain defined its interests, but it was also not exclusive. Britain had an empire in two senses – a more or less formal territorial empire over which the British claimed sovereignty and exercised jurisdiction, and an informal empire of trade and investment. Britain was very reluctant to abandon either, but found it increasingly difficult to maintain both, against the challenges of rivals, both military and economic during the twentieth century. Britain's inability to do was demonstrated above all in the two World Wars, which left Britain nominally victorious, but unable to regain the position which it had once occupied.

Sixty years ago. In the aftermath of the Second World War Churchill set out his view on Britain's changing world role in his Fulton Speech.¹³ He argued that Britain was at the centre of three overlapping circles – Empire, Anglo-America, and Europe. For Churchill the Empire was still the primary circle, but he acknowledged the importance of the other two, and the need for Britain to be fully engaged in both of them. He attached particular importance to Anglo-America, and to the need to preserve the Atlantic partnership which the war-time alliance had established, in order to prevent the kind of disengagement by the United States which took place after the First World War. The new supremacy of the United States and of the USSR was recognised, but Churchill still believed that Britain could perform the role of a great power, provided it was active in all three circles. These assumptions were quickly tested, and while the Atlantic partnership was preserved through the creation of NATO, in which Britain did play an important role, it soon became apparent that the British Empire could no longer be sustained against the hostility of the two superpowers and the rising tide of nationalism in the imperial territories. Britain no longer had the relative military or economic strength to sustain a major role in all three circles.¹⁴

Fifty years ago. These problems came to a head after the failure at Suez, which demonstrated how difficult it now was for Britain to act without American support in pursuit of its interests as it saw them. Rapid disengagement from Empire now began and the first approach to the new association that was building in Europe. But Britain at this time seemed disoriented and confused, a fact commented on by Dean Acheson, when he remarked that Britain had lost an empire but not yet found a role. He went on to say in the same speech: 'The attempt to play a separate power role, that is a role apart from Europe, a role based on a 'special relationship' with the United States, a role based on being Head of a 'Commonwealth' which has no political structure, or unity or strength...this role is about to be played out.'¹⁵ Acheson accurately diagnosed what needed to be done – Britain needed to give a new priority to building a relationship with Europe, and this was eventually accomplished with entry to the European Community achieved in 1973. This was also the period in which a new distance began to develop between Britain and the United States, with the United States keen to see Britain a full member of the European Community, and Britain increasingly accepting that the special relationship was over, and that Britain on its own could not hope to be a broker with the United States.¹⁶

Thirty years ago. This apparent new direction in British policy foundered in the 1970s. The IMF crisis in 1976 can be seen in retrospect as the turning point. The hopes that had rested on the European Community were not realised in the midst of the first generalised global recession since 1945, and instead a new trajectory developed, first tentatively under

¹³ Randolph Churchill, *Sinews of War*.

¹⁴ Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London: Eyre Methuen 1972).

¹⁵ Dean Acheson, Speech on December 5, 1962.

¹⁶ John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American relations in the cold war and after* (London, Macmillan 2001).

Callaghan, and then decisively under Thatcher, which involved a break with many of the assumptions about economic policy and the role of the state in the economy that had dominated the previous thirty years. The new direction was broadly neo-liberal, and it brought with it a new emphasis upon the importance of the special relationship for Britain's security, and a new scepticism about the potential and the desirability of the European project for Britain. Under Thatcher and then Blair Britain was repositioned as America's chief ally, no longer trying to play the role of an independent great power. On the other side the relationship with Europe became bedevilled with reluctance and ambivalence on Britain's side, and an increasingly hostile media and public opinion.¹⁷

This choice between Europe and America came to dominate the closing stages of the twentieth century, with both parties divided over the issue. Margaret Thatcher eventually made her preference for America over Europe very plain. As she has stated: 'During my lifetime most of the problems the world has faced have come...from mainland Europe,'¹⁸ but others in her party, including Michael Heseltine and Kenneth Clarke were equally determined supporters of Europe. The civil war that erupted over Europe in the Conservative party in the 1990s was one of the key factors in the party's decline. The Labour party in the meantime recovered from its anti-European phase (its 1983 manifesto had called for Britain to withdraw from the European Community), and became much more strongly pro-European, and the election of Tony Blair in 1997 appeared to signal the most pro-European British Prime Minister since Edward Heath. But in the end Blair was forced to choose, and when the choice came over Iraq he chose decisively the United States and the Atlantic relationship over the European Union, thus defining his premiership but also testing to destruction the assumptions that had underpinned British foreign policy for the previous sixty years.¹⁹

Tony Blair has always refused to admit that there was a choice between Europe and America, which in the narrow sense that it is not a case of being one or the other is obviously true. But in terms of priorities, there is of course a choice and has to be one. Blair preferred the metaphor of the bridge to describe Britain's role:²⁰

We have a unique role to play. Call it a bridge, a two lane motorway, a pivot, or call it a damn high wire, which is how it often feels; our job is to keep our sights firmly on both sides of the Atlantic. In doing so we are not subverting our country into an American poodle or a European municipality. We are advancing the British national interest in a changed world in the early twenty first century.

Anglo-America

The argument of this paper is that Blair's defence of Britain's traditional foreign policy can only be fully understood by exploring why the idea of Anglo-America has enjoyed such a hold over the British political imagination during the era of imperial decline. After the Iraq invasion Jacques Chirac remarked that Blair did not make a mistake in supporting the United States; he took the position he thought he had to take in the interest of his country and his convictions. Exploring the idea of Anglo-America gives some insight into how those interests and those convictions have been formed.

Anglo-America has been used to describe many things, for example that part of America that feels a particular empathy to things British, a relationship between particular

¹⁷ Stephen George, *An Awkward Partner* (Oxford: OUP 1994).

¹⁸ Margaret Thatcher, *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World* (London: Harper & Collins 2002), p.320.

¹⁹ Andrew Gamble, *Between Europe and America: The Future of British Politics* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003).

²⁰ Tony Blair, Speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet, City of London, 15/11/04

states – the US and the UK; a transnational political space, and a political myth, or project. It is the third of these, Anglo-America as a transnational political space, which I want to concentrate on here, because it is the basis for all the others. Anglo-America is an ‘imagined community’,²¹ encompassing both ideals and interests, which is constructed and sustained through various narratives and embodied in particular institutions. Such transnational political spaces are a key feature of our world, although less studied than either nation-states or the global economy. Such spaces arise particularly around the great powers of each era, but they exist to some extent for all states, since no state is entirely self-contained. Some states because of their history (Britain is an obvious example) are involved in many such transnational spaces, some of them overlapping. For Britain the three most important have been the Empire (with its many subdivisions), Europe, and Anglo-America. Such spaces and the communities of interest and ideals to which they give rise can be a potent source of political identity and political projects.

This notion of Anglo-America as a transnational political space embracing the English-speaking world is particularly important for understanding the relationship between Britain and the United States, and in particular for understanding the project for Anglo-American hegemony which arose in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, and has assumed many forms – Greater Britain, Atlantic Partnership, and most recently, the Anglosphere.²² It has generated one of the most powerful myths in modern British politics, in the sense of myth as an interpretation of the past and a vision of the future capable of mobilising a movement to achieve it.²³

Anglo-America has no single centre, but is composed of many states, including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, as well as Britain and the United States. These last two have long been the two most important states within Anglo-America and their relationship has been pivotal to its development, ever since the thirteen colonies successfully threw off British rule at the end of the eighteenth century. The Declaration of Independence in 1776 plunged Britain into a second civil war, which rehearsed many of the arguments of the first civil war, one hundred and forty years earlier. The ideological debate was about the rights of free born Englishmen against the authority of the Crown, and the struggle over these principles was as fierce within England as it was in the American colonies. The programme of the rebel colonists was much influenced by John Locke and Tom Paine and drew on the main themes of English radicalism.²⁴ The inability of the British state to accommodate those demands made compromise impossible, and following the intervention of the French on the side of the rebels, led to the loss of a large part of Britain’s empire in North America.

During the nineteenth century relationships between the two states gradually improved, particularly as there were for a time common economic interests. British capital poured into the United States to fund the development of its agriculture and its infrastructure, especially its railways. The cultural ties between the two states remained very close, but the growing power of the United States alarmed British governments. During the American civil war the British political class predominantly favoured the Confederacy, partly because it was landowning and aristocratic, and partly because a breakup of the Union was considered in Britain’s strategic interest.²⁵ The consolidation of a more centralised federal union across the whole of the North American landmass was opposed, and this partly explains why the British Government maintained a policy of neutrality in the conflict, and was prepared to supply arms

²¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

²² Duncan Bell, *Building Greater Britain: Empire and Identity in Victorian Political Thought, 1860-1900* (forthcoming); Watt, *Succeeding John Bull*; James Bennett, *The Anglosphere Challenge: why the English-speaking nations will lead the way in the twenty-first century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

²³ Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1972).

²⁴ John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (London: Bloomsbury 1995).

²⁵ Dimbleby & Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart*.

to the Confederacy, while British radicals, notably Cobden and sections of the working class, gave strong support to the Federal Government because of its stance against slavery.

In the nineteenth century no-one would have spoken of a special relationship between Britain and the United States. That was only to develop after 1880 and particularly in the twentieth century with the emergence of the United States as the world's leading economic, financial and subsequently military power. Britain's position in the global order was challenged by the rise of Germany and the United States and forced a major strategic readjustment.²⁶ The story of the special relationship in the twentieth century is about how that readjustment was made and its consequences. Britain concluded that it could not fight both Germany and America, and also that it could not defeat Germany without the help of the United States. In the course of defeating Germany however it became apparent that the British Empire was no longer sustainable on the old basis and also that Britain's position of hegemony over the liberal world order had been fatally undermined.²⁷

Harold Macmillan remarked during the Second World War that Britain was increasingly compelled to play Greece to America's Rome, but as Christopher Hitchens has pointed out, the real relationship was between two Romes – a declining Rome, and a rising Rome.²⁸ The accommodation that was reached between them and which the special relationship expressed was that Britain would acquiesce in the rise to world power of the United States and would seek to transfer its hegemonic role to the United States in order to preserve the liberal global order which remained a fundamental British interest. This peaceful replacement of one hegemonic power by another was unprecedented, and was not accomplished without considerable friction and misunderstandings, but there was no war. Instead Britain became the foremost ally of the United States.²⁹

This idea of succession between Britain and the United States was widely discussed among politicians and commentators on both sides of the Atlantic in the early part of the twentieth century. On the British side Halford Mackinder, Winston Churchill, Leo Amery, John Buchan, James Garvin, Lord Milner and Arthur Balfour were prominent advocates of the need for a new understanding; and this view was shared by many Americans, among them Alfred Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, John Hay, Henry Adams and Brooks Adams. The same idea was later applied retrospectively in the 1970s and 1980s by theorists of hegemonic stability which became for a time a popular narrative for some in the US and British political class. It treated the global order as an embryonic global polity, which required the provision of public goods by a global hegemon, to deal with the collective action problems created by the increasing interdependence of the global economy.³⁰ Britain had been that global hegemon in the nineteenth century, presiding over the rise of liberal economic order, formulating and enforcing many of its rules, while also acting as a model of economic and political development to which others aspired. The breakdown of that liberal world order in the First World War also saw the displacement of Britain as the world's hegemon. An interregnum ensued, because Britain although it had the political will no longer had the capacity, while the United States, although it had the capacity did not have the political will.

The process by which Britain surrendered hegemony and the United States assumed it was therefore far from smooth, and was enormously aided by the circumstances of the two world wars, which forced Britain to become financially dependent upon the United States. From the beginning of the twentieth century important sections of the British political class

²⁶ Aaron Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1988).

²⁷ Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*.

²⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *Blood, Class, and Nostalgia* (London: Vintage, 1991).

²⁹ Watt, *Succeeding John Bull*.

³⁰ Charles Kindelberger, *The World in Depression, 1929-1939* (London: Allen Lane 1973); Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

came to recognise that maintaining the liberal world order against the challenges it faced could only be done by involving the United States in the leadership of it, with all the implications for Britain's position which that entailed. Following the Venezuela incident in 1898 when the United States invoked the Monroe doctrine to claim that Venezuela lay within its sphere of influence, the British chiefs of staff concluded that Britain did not have the capacity to wage a war simultaneously on the eastern seaboard of the United States and in Europe. The inevitable conclusion was that American power had to be appeased, and if possible co-opted.³¹ Although both nations drew up contingency plans for war with the other, they were never tested, and when the United States finally became involved in world affairs as a great power it was in alliance with Britain rather than opposed to it.

One important factor in this outcome was that it had long been the settled purpose of influential sections of the political elite in both Britain and the United States to ensure that it came about. The idea of a Greater Britain, of uniting all the disparate sections of English-speaking peoples into a grand confederation, had become popular in the late nineteenth century.³² Anglo-America was an imagined community with both cultural and racial roots, and co-operation between its leading states was promoted as a matter of prudence in an increasingly threatening and hostile world. There were many dissenters to this vision of Anglo-America. Many British Conservatives wanted above all to sustain the British Empire and feared that alliance with the United States would require the dismantling of that Empire;³³ while many Americans were totally opposed to the maintenance of the British Empire and resolutely opposed their Government becoming a support for it.³⁴ The strength of feeling in the United States against being drawn into the quarrels and wars of the old world was responsible for the reluctance of United States Government to become involved in the two world wars.³⁵

The entry of the United States in each case proved decisive to the eventual outcome of both wars, but after the First World War the United States was not yet ready to undertake world leadership by organising its own hegemony. In the intervening period Britain, the former hegemon, attempted to reassemble the elements of its former economic, financial and naval supremacy. It failed. Naval supremacy was given up following American insistence at the Washington Naval Conference that Britain should accept parity of its fleet with that of the United States. Financial supremacy was lost following the restoration then final collapse of the gold standard in 1931. Industrial supremacy had been severely eroded before 1914, and vanished completely after 1918. Britain retained control of its Empire, but by 1939 it was ill-prepared for another major military struggle, and in the early years of the war was close to being overwhelmed.

The entry of the United States into the war in 1941 transformed the prospects for the survival not just of Britain but of the British Empire. But it was clear from the outset that this survival was to be on American terms. The close alliance that was forged after 1941 between Britain and the United States saw close collaboration particularly between the military and intelligence establishments of both states, and this continued into the post-war period, and is still in important respects intact today. But the United States fiercely resisted moves by Britain which it judged were aimed mainly at restoring its imperial power, and it also exerted severe financial pressure on Britain, which limited the capacity of Britain to preserve its imperial position after 1945 even had it had the political will to do so. The withdrawal from empire might have been even speedier than it was had it not been for the advent of the cold

³¹ Iestyn Adams, *Brothers Across the Ocean: British foreign policy and the origins of the Anglo-American special relationship, 1900-1905* (London: Tauris, 2005).

³² Bell, *Building Greater Britain*.

³³ A.P.Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and its enemies: A study in British power* (London: Macmillan 1985).

³⁴ Dimpleby & Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart*.

³⁵ Lloyd Gardner, *A Covenant with Power: America and world order from Wilson to Reagan* (London: Macmillan 1984).

war, which persuaded the Americans, now ready and eager to exercise a global hegemonic role, that there should not be a too precipitate withdrawal by Britain from areas which were vulnerable to communism.

Nevertheless it was clear that after 1945 Britain could no longer claim to be the equal of the United States, although it remained the most important military power in the western alliance, and until the 1950s the most important economic power as well. The new relationship was symbolically illustrated by the ill-fated Suez invasion of 1956, when the Anglo-French invasion force was first halted, and then withdrawn, having achieved its military objectives, by the use of American financial pressure. Britain never acted independently in such a major military enterprise again. The Falklands War in 1982 was heavily dependent on American logistical support, and it was highly exceptional. Everywhere else British forces were withdrawn and colonies given their independence. By the time of the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 the British Empire had been reduced to a few isolated far flung islands like the Falklands and old fortress colonies like Gibraltar.

Through this period from 1945 to 1990 the special relationship waned, especially after 1956, but it still possessed a reality through the extensive defence and intelligence collaboration between the two states. These were two extremely well-developed Anglo-American communities. It also could be revived from time to time as in the 1980s when Britain under Margaret Thatcher proved the most reliable of all the NATO allies for the United States during the new cold war. But Britain's overall importance as a global power was much less in 1980 than it had been in 1950. It was only one of many allies of the United States, and ties of culture and race were not sufficient to outweigh hard-headed calculations of national interest. Many concluded as a result that the special relationship was now a fiction, perhaps had always been a fiction, a rhetorical device invented by Churchill and used by his successors to disguise the fact of Britain's displacement as a great power.³⁶

The hegemonic stability theory has been criticised from many angles. One particular criticism is that Britain never was a hegemon. In the 1880s Constantin Frantz had suggested there was something insubstantial about Britain, it was at best eine künstliche Weltmacht. This argument has recently been revived and expanded by Patrick O'Brien who argues that comparisons between Britain and the United States are misplaced. Britain was at best an underdeveloped hegemon, and always an unconscious and unaspiring one. He argues that Britain only became interested in hegemony when the possibilities for exercising it were fast disappearing. He sees a huge gulf between Britain and the United States as 'hegemons' in relation to their respective intentions, capacities, and the instruments at their disposal. Their institutional, military, economic and political capacities were so different that it puts the United States into a different class. The kind of hegemony Britain was able (even if willing, which O'Brien doubts) to exercise in the nineteenth century belongs to a different order of being when compared to the hegemony the United States was able to exercise in the middle of the twentieth century.

O'Brien is right to puncture some of the more facile comparisons that have been made between Britain and the United States. The circumstances in which each has been a leading power are historically very different. But there are a number of points which he overlooks, and which help explain why Anglo-America became so important in British post-imperial politics.

Firstly, the world economy that emerged after 1815 was in certain respects qualitatively new, because of the surge of industrial productivity that had taken place, first in Britain, and later in many other countries. It took time to recognise how new, and that it required governing and stabilising in new ways that went beyond the old ways of territory and empire, and the balancing of great powers. Britain had a foot in both worlds – accumulator of the largest

³⁶ Watt, *Succeeding John Bull*; Dumbrell, *The Special Relationship*.

territorial empire, but simultaneously the architect, however unplanned, of the new liberal world order. Britain was therefore increasingly torn between a hegemonic and an imperial logic. In this meaning of hegemony, the term refers not to territory and empire, but to the rules and regimes based order created by a leading state.³⁷ The hegemon comes to identify its own interest with the openness and stability of the larger political system, and Britain is the first major example of this.

Secondly, there is an important distinction between passive and active hegemony, between a structural position of leadership in the global economy, such as Britain undoubtedly enjoyed in the middle of the nineteenth century³⁸, and active management of the international state system and the global economy, which the United States practised in the second half of the twentieth century.

Thirdly, there is indeed a huge gulf in capacity and intention between nineteenth century Britain and the twentieth century United States. But this is partly a matter of perspective. United States' capacities do look huge in relation to the state system and the global economy of the nineteenth century, but in relation to the state system and global economy of the twenty first century they look rather inadequate.³⁹

Finally, the influence and reach of the British model in the nineteenth century should not be underestimated. Britain was for a time a model to the rest of the world in terms of many of the institutions it pioneered – political, financial, commercial, industrial, and legal; as well as in civil society and in ideas.⁴⁰ It was these achievements that convinced so many of the British political elite that the British were exceptional, but also that the Americans because they shared so much of this same tradition might be seen as collaborators in the same enterprise. And might even be entrusted with what the British had begun.

Conclusion

The myth of Anglo-America was a powerful consolation for the demise of Empire, and the shrinking place of Britain in the world in the second half of the twentieth century. But it was founded on more than delusion. The pull of Anglo-America has proved intense for every British Prime Minister since Churchill, with the possible exception of Edward Heath. It remains the bedrock of British foreign policy. Donald Watt's question, 'why do statesmen act as they do?' directs attention to the ways in which world views are formed and persist. Once the importance of Anglo-America in defining British hopes for the survival of a particular kind of world order, an order which Britain did much originally to bring into being, and which has shaped so many British institutions, from the City of London to British Universities, is grasped, then it is easier to understand why Tony Blair appeared to act against his political self-interest and once again gave priority to the Atlantic rather than the European relationship. Whether he has now pushed this relationship to breaking point, and whether the Blair Government and its decisions on Iraq will come to be seen as a moment of transition towards a predominantly European identity and European future remain unclear. It is certainly hard to see Britain ever again participating in a coalition of the willing.

³⁷ John Ikenberry, 'Liberalism and Empire: Logics of Order in the American Unipolar Age', *Review of International Studies* (2004) 30, 609-630.

³⁸ Eric Hobsbawm *Industry and Empire: An Economic history of Britain since 1750* (London: Weidenfeld 1999).

³⁹ Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: why the world's only superpower cant go it alone* (New York: OUP 2002).

⁴⁰ Bennett, *The Anglosphere Challenge*.

Table 1: Attitudes to the Iraq War

Do you think Britain and the United States are/were right or wrong to take military action against Iraq?	Right	Wrong
20/03/03 (start of war)	53	39
10/04/03 (fall of Baghdad)	66	29
08/05/04 (after torture pictures)	43	49
25/04/05 (General Election)	35	53
27/03/06	33	57

Source: YouGov Iraq Trends. 2006. www.YouGov.com

TABLE 2

Military Action Against Iraq

Do you believe Britain should continue to keep troops in Iraq or should they be withdrawn?	Keep Troops in Iraq Withdraw Troops	41% 53%
Black Watch Deployment	Support Oppose	26% 63%
Further US requests	Britain should agree Britain should refuse	21% 65%
Will the Black Watch be home by Xmas?	Probably Probably Not	16% 75%
Is the decision purely military or related to US election?	Purely Military Related to Election	27% 56%
Is Tony Blair too close to George Bush?	Too close About right Not close enough	68% 24% 1%
Has the war increased the threat of terrorism?	Increased Reduced	60% 9%
Are you optimistic or pessimistic about long-term prospects for peace and prosperity in Iraq?	Optimistic Pessimistic	20% 62%

Source: YouGov 22-23 October 2004 Mail on Sunday.

TABLE 3

How much confidence do you have in each of the following to take the right decisions about Iraq?

George Bush	A great deal	3%	
	A fair amount	14%	17%
	Not much	22%	
	None at all	56%	78%
Tony Blair	A great deal	9%	
	A fair amount	28%	37%
	Not much	32%	
	None at all	27%	59%
Michael Howard	A great deal	3%	
	A fair amount	26%	29%
	Not much	34%	
	None at all	25%	59%
Charles Kennedy	A great deal	4%	
	A fair amount	26%	30%
	Not much	30%	
	None at all	25%	55%
John Kerry	A great deal	2%	
	A fair amount	24%	26%
	Not much	32%	
	None at all	15%	47%

Source YouGov 26-28 October 2004. *Daily Telegraph*. Iraq, British and US Politics, 29/10/2004.