

Opinion – Britain and the American South: A Special Relationship?

Written by Curtis Large

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CURTIS LARGE, AUG 15 2023

On 15 July 2018, then-President Donald Trump declared relations between the United States and the United Kingdom to be at ‘the highest level of special. In doing so, he appeared to bolster the age-old Atlanticist tradition which argues that the two nations share ‘unusually close institutional bonds, frequent consultation and concerted policies’ (Colman 2004, 1). So ubiquitous still are mentions of a ‘Special Relationship’, academic and not, that its existence is taken for granted by the casual observer. This sees the concept perceived through a narrow foreign policy lens, typically indicating total symmetry between the powers due to their military alliances in every major interstate conflict since World War II.

However, little attention has been applied to determine if this theorised phenomenon extends beyond policymakers in London and Washington, or, to take a more demographic approach, ‘groups of American East Coast Anglophiles’ (Hathaway 1990, xvi). Few if any communities have been so overlooked in this respect than the American South. Historically a distinct political region in its own right, the purpose of this piece is to offer some commentary regarding the nature of British-Southern relations since 1946, the year Winston Churchill coined the term (Colman 2004, 2; Woodard 2013, 1). To do this, I will focus my analysis on three key areas: strategic and diplomatic links, attitudes towards civil society, and economic interplay.

While the formal statecraft behind notions of a Special Relationship is well documented, this does not weaken its significance when assessing congruence between Britain and the South. Despite the UK embodying just one of the US’s military partners, albeit the most crucial, during both the Gulf War (1990–1991) and the first invasion of Iraq (2003), the South embraced these coalitions to a greater extent than any other American region. Whether this was down to what Alexis de Tocqueville (2007, 331) diagnosed as Southerners being ‘passionately fond of hunting and war’ is debatable. Whatever the catalyst, ‘while antiwar rallies flourished in cities like Boston, New York, and San Francisco, the South had patriotic parades in support of the troops’ (Woodard 2013, 367). Meanwhile, those cities hosting demonstrations against joint intervention were cosmopolitan centres traditionally aligned with Anglophile sentiments. Consequently, these citizens relegated any affinity for martial cooperation in favour of neutral pacifism, apparently disinterested in the ententes that had previously bound the two states.

The South, having avoided any such fracture, now accommodates British consulates in Atlanta, Houston, and Miami, with auxiliary offices in Dallas, Raleigh, and San Antonio. According to the UK Government, each deals ‘with a wide range of political, commercial, security and economic questions of interest to the UK and this region of the United States.’ It also later insists that British foreign policy prioritises finding solutions to these ‘questions of interest’ in the American South at large. The UK’s commitment therefore not only recognises the South as an autonomous region with its own political identity, doubtless important for healthy relations with what was a secessionist Confederacy (Woodard 2013, 5) but sees its alignment as significant enough to pledge itself to work for the sole benefit of a foreign order.

An important caveat in analysing both Southern support for coalition militarism, as well as Britain’s diplomatic presence in the South, is that neither of these ties is necessarily exclusive. The idea that a Special Relationship motivated widespread enlistment in the region is spurious. Equally, most UK envoys in America are located outside of

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the South, with the central embassy headquartered in Washington.

But this should not characterise the British political establishment as being interested in the region on the basis of its allegiance to the US alone. During the latter half of the 20th century, Britain's left-wing expressed much curiosity about the peculiar socio-economic conditions of the South. Although much of this intrigue was founded on cluelessness—future MP Tony Benn (1994, 119) noted on his 1947 arrival into Austin that 'one's first day in the real South presents a temptation to look round for a type'—serious intrigue persisted. Especially prevalent was opposition by Brits to racial segregation as a pillar of Southern society. This was exemplified in protestors ranging from the philosopher Bertrand Russell to a group of Welsh miners, who, upon the failure of black performer Paul Robeson to obtain an American passport in 1950, made a parade float which depicted a lynching by the Ku Klux Klan (Wilford 2003, 163–64).

However, such instances do not speak to attitudes regarding the UK among Southerners themselves. Beyond the innumerable lecture tours and eloquent critiques logged by British socialists about the South and its inequalities, it was the Labor Director of the NAACP, the American Herbert Hill, who complained in 1959 of 'the high incidence of police brutality toward black residents, the poor living conditions endured by immigrants, and the inaction of local white liberals' – after a tour of London (quoted in Wilford 2003, 167). Both Britain and the South were and are mired by troubling racial imbalances, common ground which at the same time has frustrated solidarity owing to mutual disapproval.

Yet such direct encounters, dismissive or otherwise, are not essential for the two parties to exhibit similar social circumstances. For example, in 1976, Rose conducted a comparative study between the five states of the Deep South (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina) and Northern Ireland. In it, he outlines the unequal co-existences of two contrasting identity groups, with white Southerners equated to Ulster Protestants and African Americans to Northern Irish Catholics (Rose 1976, 264). Before describing how both regions are (1) peripheral to a larger power, (2) entertain assigned demographic roles, and (3) maintain the pervasive authority of the church, he concludes that 'a group constituting a majority by virtue of a single social characteristic—skin color in America, and religion in Northern Ireland—has also constituted a cohesive bloc electorally, and thus enjoyed the advantages of monopolizing political power' (Rose 1976, 257, 265).

For all of this coincidence, its implications for any Special Relationship remain unclear. Certainly, stark differences in political outlook abide between Britain and the South. The most notable of these is a divergent stance towards crime and punishment. This reached its zenith in 1995 with British attempts to stop the execution of English-born Nicholas Ingram, widely acknowledged as mentally unsound, at the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Center. Attracting petitions for clemency from no less than 53 Westminster MPs, as well as George Carey, the then-Archbishop of Canterbury, Ingram was killed regardless.

As the incumbent UK Prime Minister John Major conceded 'with deepest regret, that there [were] no proper grounds for the British Government to intervene with the State of Georgia', the Southern polity distanced itself from Britain by acting against the pleas of some of its highest officeholders. Even in the presence of such profound resistance, voiced by the elites of the US' most committed diplomatic partner, the South showed a willingness to bypass considerations of a Special Relationship in running its domestic affairs.

Despite this, political units need not enjoy complete agreement in order to interact for mutual reward. Of this Britain and the South are eager to take full advantage. Bilateral trading relationships heavily implicate every state in the region, with Texas standing as a principal beneficiary. UK foreign direct investment (FDI) is the highest of any nation in the Lone Star State, comprising 22% of its total FDI income. Amounting to \$23.5 billion, this alone was responsible for the creation of 87,800 Texan jobs between 2009 and 2013.

Natural resources and low tax rates have similarly made the wider South a fertile prospect for British funding. Whether because of Florida's cheap property, North Carolina's suitability for innovative start-ups, or South Carolina's establishment of a UK trade mission, money from Britain has infiltrated virtually every sector of the Southern economy. The benefits have been considerable even among the less prosperous states in the region. Alabama, for

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instance, has experienced an overall growth in its exports of both goods and services across the pond in recent years. This has sustained 6,100 employees and allowed the Cotton State to become a respectable stakeholder within Britain's international trade.

In 1956, Liverpoolian John Lennon heard the voice of Mississippian Elvis Presley for the first time. It is a fitting allegory for the contemporary state of British-Southern relations: 'Suddenly there's this hillbilly hiccupping on tape echo ... we didn't know what the hell Presley was singing about ... To us, it just sounded like a noise that was great' (quoted in Ward 2003, 203). The first line indicates presumptuousness about the other. Just as British leftists like Tony Benn had arrived in the South looking for 'a type', or how the country's elite had expectantly asked Georgia to stay the execution of Nicholas Ingram, interactions are often defined by naivety.

This pertains to the second section of Lennon's quote, expressing confusion. There exists an obstacle in dealings between Britain and the South. While both sides seek, with the best intentions, to improve understandings of one another's society and politics, historical attempts have proved fruitless. This is likely owing to a lack of direct contact among the ordinary people of these territories, with theoretical comparisons only finding relevance on a theoretical level.

More supportive of the case for a Special Relationship, however, are the lucrative economic ties that continue to enrich the two parties. Those connections that were created most organically between them, namely of shared financial gain, have fostered stronger links than any well-meaning societal initiative since Victory in Europe Day. And though in other matters harmony has not been abundant since 1946, this trade-based reciprocity hints that there does survive at least the potential for a wider and deeper alliance. While its foundations are currently obscure, like Presley, it could one day just sound 'like a noise that was great.'

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