

THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP IS STILL SPECIAL

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, APR 20 2010

A House of Commons committee recently claimed that the UK had lost its “Special Relationship” with the US. The committee argued that the UK had few of the benefits attributed to the Special Relationship, especially the ability to influence US policy, and therefore Britain should to say no to the relations’ obligations, especially the perceived need to become involved in US military operations. I can’t imagine that the committee believes that the unique relationship between the US and the UK that has existed since the Second World War has deteriorated to such an extent that it is in the UK’s interest to abandon it.

To begin with, the British government’s influence on US policy was never that great. Prior to the Second World War, there was conflict and rivalry in the relations between the nations. The war made them close allies, but also settled the question of which nation was the dominant power if there were major doubts that far into the 20th Century. The distribution of commands within NATO, US attitudes toward British attempts to maintain an empire, and the Suez Crisis took away all pretense of a partnership of near equals. But the British government has been able to say no to the US many times since then. For example, there were no British troops in Vietnam although there had been in Korea. And the US has had on occasion to pay close attention to UK interests. The desire for British military participation in the US invasion of Iraq lead to a long dance with the UN for its approval, frustrated in the end, but an effort largely made to satisfy the perceived needs of British domestic politics.

Mostly the Special Relationship has been a public display of consultation and military collaboration that gave Britain special status among America’s allies in exchange for the American military’s privileged access to British facilities globally and the endorsement of US actions, not always offered. Thus the American military stationed ballistic missile submarines in Scotland, camped out in Diego Garcia, and tested naval gear in Bermudan waters. In turn Britain is given unusual access to America’s intelligence data and military technology, the Trident missile system being just one example. No other country consistently gets as close to America’s most guarded information and operations.

Without the Special Relationship Britain is just one medium size country among several in the European Union. It is not the most populous, the richest, or the most important. The English language dominates international commerce and diplomacy, but not because of the English. The Royal Navy is respected for its past and its close ties with the US Navy. British officials gain extra attention as the route to American ones. Ask a French or German diplomat how special would be the UK without the Special Relationship.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.

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