

# The Redemption of British-American Special Intelligence Relationship

Written by Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/12/17/the-british-american-special-intelligence-relationship/>

RHODRI JEFFREYS-JONES, DEC 17 2018

This contribution examines the history and present-day status of a phenomenon long held dear by those who govern the United Kingdom – the special intelligence relationship (SIR) with the United States. It questions the assumption that the SIR was a Cold War phenomenon, and considers the implications of the Brexit debate. It argues that the SIR rose and then fell, and that the key to partial redemption may be found in Britain's relationship with the European Union (EU).

### Trust and the Origins of the SIR Concept

Cooperation has been a prominent feature of secret intelligence – it allows the pooling of efforts and resources. Here, trust is an important element. The British-American intelligence relationship was the dominant example of international trust and cooperation in matters of espionage in the twentieth century, and we know it as the *special* intelligence relationship, an intelligence relationship like none other on the planet.

The *concept* of the SIR originated with Winston Churchill, even if the practices of the SIR predated his years as prime minister. Churchill introduced the term 'special relationship' in his Fulton, Missouri speech of 1946, in which he announced that an 'iron curtain' had descended across Europe.[1] He discreetly made no mention of the special relationship's intelligence dimension on that occasion, but he was an intelligence enthusiast, and its inclusion was implicit.

### Cold War Genesis Debunked

Does the iron curtain context of the Churchill's rhetoric mean that the special relationship was a distinctly Cold War phenomenon? That would have ominous implications for the health of the relationship post- Cold War. In fact, the future of British and American intelligence agencies, whether or not they cooperated, did look bleak for a while in the 1990s. Senator Daniel P. Moynihan led a serious campaign for the abolition of the CIA.[2] The intelligence agencies cast about for new missions in the period between the collapse of European communism and the emergence of the international terrorist threat. In the U.K., for example, MI5 seized control of Northern Ireland security and the war against serious organized crime. With the future of individual agencies uncertain, the prospects for liaison were not bright, either – you can't have a special relationship without the other.

But while the Cold War may have had a unifying effect on American and British intelligence, it was not the quintessential cement. The U.K. and the USA had had a special intelligence relationship *before* 1946. For example, in the Spanish-American War of 1898, Britain gave material assistance to the US Secret Service when it broke up Spain's spy ring centred in Montreal, while in World War I, the English novelist Somerset Maugham spied on Bolshevik Russia and received half his salary in dollars. *After* the Cold War, too, the notion of the special relationship survives, and that includes its intelligence dimension. Senior figures in the UK intelligence community still cling to the SIR like a dog with a favourite old bone.

### Cryptographic Tensions

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The special intelligence relationship has nevertheless been problematic from its beginning, and I would argue that since the 1960s the difficulties have become more acute. The problem was evident in the vital realm of codebreaking. Britain had a start on America in both world wars. In World War I, Room 40 cryptographers intercepted German cable and radio messages. Provocatively, these Admiralty whizz-kids refused to pass on to their American counterparts decryption expertise, making available only the translated decodes.

At first, history repeated itself in World War II. Early in the war, Prime Minister Churchill asked, 'Are we going to throw all our secrets into the American lap? If so, I am against it. It would be much better to go slow, as we have far more to give than they.'<sup>[3]</sup> However, the sharing of cryptographic secrets in World War II did take place and was the pinnacle of the special intelligence relationship. In part because of the computerisation of codebreaking, the Americans now began to pull ahead. The United Kingdom-United States of America (UKUSA) signals intelligence (SIGINT) agreements that followed in the wake of Churchill's Fulton speech tied together the 'Five Eyes' white Anglophonic nations, Canada, New Zealand and Australia being the other signatories. America now held the trump cards.

Post-1960s, a trajectory of periodic, confidence-sapping SIGINT let-downs set in. When Ted Heath failed to toe the Henry Kissinger line on European integration, the United States threatened to cancel its intelligence and nuclear agreements with the U.K.<sup>[4]</sup> The flow of information from NSA and CIA to their British counterparts temporarily slowed down. Memories of this event were still vivid enough to haunt the government of John Major. In the course of the Bosnian conflict of the 1990s, there was U.S. displeasure at British policy. It again appears to have resulted in an effort at intelligence starvation. The BBC journalist Sheena McDonald asserted that in late 1994 the 'supply of intelligence to the British was temporarily cut off, causing panic in Whitehall.'<sup>[5]</sup>

In 2000, the incoming Bush administration warned Tony Blair to cool his plans for a European Union Army. Its spokesman John Bolton said such an artifact would be 'leaky'. He said the 'unique bilateral relationship is coming under intense strain.' He added, 'The special U.S. U.K. relationship in intelligence rests fundamentally not on architecture, but on trust.'<sup>[6]</sup> That word 'trust' again.

## The Impact of Betrayals and Demographic Change

In spite of frequent professions of faith in the SIR, it was no longer what it used to be. Since the 1960s, it had become apparent that the UK was not the intelligence partner of old. The British Empire was dying. The Cambridge spy ring – Kim Philby et al – all but destroyed trust in British reliability in clandestine matters.<sup>[7]</sup> In American discourse, one heard less and less about the special relationship. Writing about it in the early 1990s, the political journalist John Dickie noted 'the term is rarely heard in Washington – even in the British Embassy.'<sup>[8]</sup>

America was becoming less Anglo-Saxon, and more oriented to the Pacific. According to a survey in September 2011, only 38% of Americans felt the EU as a whole – let alone the UK – was important to their national interests, while more than half of those polled saw Asian countries as important.<sup>[9]</sup> As for British public opinion, the *Observer* commissioned a comparison of attitudes in 1963 and 2013. In 1963, 36% of those polled thought the UK should have very close ties with the USA. The 2013 figure was 14%.<sup>[10]</sup> All this was well before the Donald Trump fracas.

## The Brexit Complication

When I was writing *In Spies We Trust*, the first edition of which came out in 2013, I thought that the solution was for the USA to pursue its revised relationships across the globe while remaining friendly to the UK, and for the UK to look to enhancing intelligence cooperation within the European Union. In The Hague there was Europol, brilliantly led by Rob Wainwright, and a model of international cooperation in the fight against serious organized crime and terrorism. In Brussels, there was the European Council's Situation Centre (known as SITCEN), an embryonic intelligence analysis unit. France brought to the table its satellite launching capability, an alternative to the American Global Positioning System (GPS) with its inbuilt intelligence capabilities. Could the assets of Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) be thrown into the European Union mix?

The Brexit episode clearly complicated the issue. At first sight, the SIR with the United States seemed to be on the

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point of redemption, if only by default. President Trump said his relationship with Prime Minister Theresa May was 'the highest level of special.'<sup>[1]</sup> Yet, 'America First' Trump and his National Security Advisor John Bolton were not reassuring figures. It was becoming apparent to a widening circle that the SIR of old was no longer a reality. There has been a dawning realization that the E.U. offers an option, irrespective of the nature of the economic relationship between the U.K. and the E.U.<sup>[12]</sup> After all, the twentieth-century intelligence relationship that Britain had with America was never dependent on a customs union.

## Conclusion

The SIR was more than a Cold War phenomenon, and in spite of serious erosion it is reasonable to expect its continuation in some form. Yet the argument for ever-closer U.K.-E.U. intelligence cooperation remains strong. American intelligence is credible compared with its equivalent in undemocratic societies, but in the interest of objectivity still needs to be challenged. If a second large democratic bloc such as the E.U. were to have the capability of making independent, sometimes competitive, estimates based on its own intelligence, it would be healthy for the wider world. Such an arrangement need not and should not preclude continuing U.K. intelligence cooperation with the United States. In fact, it could redeem it, by allowing British intelligence to speak to America with resourced and independent wisdom, and without subservient dependency.

## Notes

[1] An advanced Google search suggests there were no public examples of the use of the phrase "special relationship" before Churchill's speech of 5 March 1946. The historian John Dumbrell has pointed to the use of similar but not identical language during World War II: Dumbrell, *A Special relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), p. 7.

[2] Daniel Moynihan, 'Do We Still Need the CIA? The State Department Can Do the Job,' *New York Times*, 19 May 1991; Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *In Spies We Trust: The Story of Western Intelligence* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp. 173-6.

[3] Churchill, minute to Hastings Ismay, 17 July 1940, quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, 6 vols., VI: *Finest Hour* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p. 672.

[4] Telephone transcript of Kissinger talking to President Richard Nixon, in Thomas Robb, 'Henry Kissinger, Great Britain and the "Year of Europe": The "Tangled Skein",' *Contemporary British History*, 24 (July 2010), 308.

[5] Sheena McDonald, 'Allies and Lies', BBC News report, 22 June 2001, accessed on 11 December 2018 at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/correspondent/1390536.stm>>; confidential information from a senior British intelligence source.

[6] Bolton article in the *European Journal* quoted in the *Daily Mail*, 21 December 2000.

[7] MI6's J.M. Bruce Lockhart recalled that the Cambridge spy ring problem almost paralyzed his agency's relationship with the CIA: *Tom Bower, The Perfect English Spy: Sir Dick White and the Secret war 1935-90* (London: Heinemann, 1995), p. 132.

[8] John Dickie, *'Special' No More: Anglo-American Relations: Rhetoric and Reality* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), p. x.

[9] Transatlantic Trends, 'Americans say Asia is more important than EU: Survey' (14 September 2011): <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-usa-survey-idUSTRE78D54120110914?feedType=RSS>> (accessed 11 December 2018).

[10] TNS BMRB opinion poll results reported in Daniel Boffey, 'How We Became a Nation of Political Cynics,' *Observer*, 17 November 2013.

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[11] Trump quoted in the *Guardian*, 13 July 2018.

[12] In an article that cited Prime Minister May as being in favour of U.K. intelligence cooperation with the E.U. regardless of Brexit considerations, Anthony Glees outlined the case for the European tie: 'What Brexit Means for British and European Intelligence Agencies,' *Journal of Intelligence History*, 16/2 (2017): 70-75.

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## About the author:

**Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones** is Emeritus Professor, History, University of Edinburgh and Honorary President of the Scottish Society for the Study of America. He has written several books and articles including *We Know All About You: The Story of Surveillance in Britain and America*, *In Spies We Trust: The Story of Western Intelligence*. His book *The American Left: Its Impact on Politics and Society since 1900* won the Richard E. Neustadt Prize for the best book of 2013 on U.S. government, politics and political history.