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How Important are Shared Culture, Language and Values to the 'special relationship' between Britain and the United States?

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OLIVER LEWIS, DEC 3 2007

In 1946 Sir Winston Churchill delivered his famous 'Iron Curtain' speech in Fulton, Missouri, speculating on the future of the world order. Within it, he described "the fraternal association of the English-speaking people" that meant "a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States of America"[1]. Since that day politicians, academics and commentators on both sides of the Atlantic frequently describe the warm diplomatic, cultural and historical relations between the United States and the United Kingdom as being a 'special relationship'.

However, while, as John Dumbrell asserts, this relationship drew on "prior cultural, linguistic and historical links, the roots of the 'special relationship... are widely and correctly seen to lie in the period of collaboration between the allies during World War Two"[2]. It is this shared cultural heritage and its purport to the conduct – particularly the success – of bilateral relations between the United States and the United Kingdom that will be examined within this essay. Culture, argued Clifford Geertz and supported by Dumbrell, is a concept constructed of historical symbolism and inherited conceptual frameworks within which humankind communicate, develop knowledge and shape their attitudes towards life[3]. Therefore, the shared culture between the United States and the United Kingdom implies a shared system of values, ideology and beliefs, and tradition. Although not explicitly referenced by Geertz, a linguistic heritage – Churchill's 'English-speaking people' – is shared by Britain and America, which through expression in human communication and expression (notably literature) is a key component in their shared culture. The limitations of this essay have dictated that I examine the import of culture from an entirely British perspective, and not a full interchange in both directions. Nevertheless, I will argue that the shared culture between Britain and the United States has been imperative in the longevity of the 'special relationship'; that without these historical links the major divergences of national interests that have arisen in the past could have made the intimate relations we see now, in the wake of the second Gulf War, and in past instances, a highly unlikely possibility. Therefore, I argue that the shared culture is very important, but not the exclusive component of bilateral relations between the US and the UK:

How Important are Shared Culture, Language and Values to the 'special relationship' between E

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That while national interest dictates to a larger extent the nature of relations, shared culture is the sustaining and somewhat elasticised bond that draws the two countries together.

The Thirteen Colonies that sparked the American Revolution were once dominions of the British Crown, many of which were direct immigrants from the United Kingdom or traced their lineage to earlier British (English, in the case of many American elites) settlers. Consequently, it is possible to highlight shared cultural components from the earliest days of an independent America. As Peter Onuf asserts and is supported by the references to English law and statute within the 1776 Declaration of Independence, "Jefferson and his revolutionary colleagues first invoked the law of nature and nations in order to define satisfactory terms of union [for the Colonies] *within* the British Empire" and that only when rebuffed by a "corrupt and tyrannical imperial administration"[4] did they decide in favour of full independence. Indeed, some of the 'Founding Fathers' and leading intellectuals responsible for the creation of the American nation, such as Alexander Hamilton, argued for a vision of the United States as a hemispheric power modelled directly on Britain. Similarly, the political and legal philosophers that contributed to the evolution of the British Parliamentary model were called upon in support of arguments for the precise nature of government in the new United States; for instance, the notions of sovereignty attributed to Thomas Hobbes were ingrained within the intellectual mentality of the new American politicians to the same extent as their British counterparts. While revolutionary, the intellectuals responsible for the formation of the new state had, as Onuf contests, a "conceptual genealogy" that took them back to "British opposition and ultimately Florentine and classical sources"; a common ideological heritage between the emerging state and the former ruler. Furthermore, as Kaufmann claims, the American revolutionary movement "was by no means a clear-cut nationalist movement" but instead had begun as a split between "Whig and Tory in Britain, the United States, and in what was to become Canada". Great Britain was not simply the oppressive and tyrannical regime that wished to impose taxation without representation, rather, the political elites within Parliament mirrored the debate about the liberties and rights of the English-speaking colonies as they occurred within those colonies. Kaufmann supports this claim, stating that "British Whig intellectuals like Edmund Burke and Charles James Fox"[5] actively encouraged the American Revolutionaries. Dumbrell supports Onuf's claim, commenting that "the revolution against British rule famously involved the airing of political ideas derived from the English radical and republican traditions"[6]. Consequently, it is possible to highlight the importance of commonly-held beliefs, values and ideologies in the earliest relations between Britain and America; political and philosophical discourse across both sides of the Atlantic was starkly similar, as it has proven at various points in the proceeding centuries. Interestingly, many publications following the achievement of independence spoke of how, having broken the old 'political bands' with Great Britain it could now pursue new 'political' relations with other European powers; very few rational texts call for the dissolution of cultural or linguistic bonds with Britain[7]. While Jefferson and other patriots were rebuffing the British people as "unfeeling brethren", Onuf proposes that the

How Important are Shared Culture, Language and Values to the 'special relationship' between E

Written by Oliver Lewis

“exalted state of revolutionary brotherhood reflected, even as it negated, a fantasy of transatlantic union, the myth of a transcendent British national identity”. The conceptual notion of the Colonist’s identity had revolved around their continued and supposedly immutable ties to the British people; the act of revolution had indeed negated them, but in doing so the consequential immediate construction of the state remained within a framework of understanding very much influenced by ‘British’ intellectual movements. Crucially, Onuf argues that the American act of independence was begun by a “provincial fragment of the British people” who established a new nation “*not* because [it] was their destiny, but rather because they hoped to secure their rights within a more perfect British imperial order”[8]. The very Constitutional documentation that continues to influence the formation and conduct of American foreign policy today, and that provides US statesmen not only with rules on the execution of policy but also values and moral imperatives, was itself shaped by British intellectual heritage and British political systems at its origins. Thus, the historical examples of relations between Britain and the United States, and how interplay between the two societies influenced one-another, continues to have an underlying importance to the conduct of the ‘special relationship’ in the 21st Century.

To this day, and because of its colonial expansion, the United Kingdom is the only of the major European powers whose first language matches that of the United States. Historically, it is easy to identify the importance a shared language could have on the conduct of international relations; there is no need for interpreters and the necessary delays of translation, both political leaderships can understand one-another clearly and communicate using common language, analogies, colloquial terminology and humour. Indeed, at all levels of government communication is possible and potentially immediate without the necessity of a dedicated department to translate correspondence. Ashton argues that “the scrambler phone gave [Prime Minister Harold Macmillan] a direct secure link to the President, which the two men could also exploit in circumstances where they wanted to bypass their respective bureaucracies”[9]. Similar direct phone-lines have been present in the offices of Prime Ministers and Presidents before and after Macmillan; such an innovation is only a viable option if both leaders speak a common language proficiently enough in which to communicate without the necessities of declarative statements and the increased possibility of misunderstanding or ambiguity. Furthermore, outside the strictly political sphere, cultural similarities and the notion of a common identity are often fostered through the use of a common language in the conduct of everyday life; linguistic solidarity further opens avenues for the sharing of literature, journalism, art, academic discourse, radio, film and television. Unity between two different peoples, who resides within different territories and conduct their lives within differing social dynamics, is only feasible if a strong notion of common identity can be found; race, such as the case between the Germans and Austrians in the Second World War, is one, and language, is another: With unity, comes a greater perception of solidarity and security. Dumbrell claims that as early as 1890, elites on both sides of the Atlantic “advanced ideas of the desired unity of English-speaking peoples”[10]. Moreover, that in 1898 US

How Important are Shared Culture, Language and Values to the 'special relationship' between Britain and the United States?

Written by Oliver Lewis

Secretary of State Richard Olney asserted that a 'close community' based on "origin, speech, thought, literature, institutions, ideals would obviate any future conflict" between the United States and Britain, and "would cause them to stand together against common enemies"[11]. Similar thought can be attributed to the formation of NATO, where very similar commonalities were invoked in the hope of securing the US and Western Europe against a 'common enemy'. Furthermore, current US foreign policy is increasingly dividing the world into simplistic perceptions of 'us and them', based on divergences of political systems, religious belief or social practice, where those with a broadly 'American culture' are accepted, and those without are looked upon with paranoia and mistrust. Referring to the Second World War, the British Ambassador to Washington at the time speculated that:

"It is widely held in America that the issue in Europe is the clash between the democratic and the totalitarian or autocratic philosophies of government, and on that question every American is whole-heartedly in sympathy with the former"[12].

Hence, a shared value system has been a staple component of the 'special relationship' throughout the 20th and into the 21st Century. Britain and America are widely perceived to share many of the same, largely 'liberal', values. Bilateral relations between the United States and the United Kingdom are arguably conducted along these lines, where shared liberal capitalist ideals are the currency and wider cultural similarities add to the sense of solidarity between the two nations and the ease in which cooperation – political, diplomatic and military – may be conducted. Close cooperation within the military is only sustainable over long periods of time if, at every level in the chain of command, troops can understand and communicate effectively and quickly with their foreign counterparts. Strategic planning is eminently possible without a common language, as only a select few senior commanders (often with interpreters) need communicate, but at the tactical level, when delays in communication or confusion regarding orders can turn the tide of battle, the increase in understanding that a common language provides is of vital importance. The success and close integration of the British and American commands during the Second World War is testament to the importance a shared language has in relations between military forces, and between military forces and the civilian population around which they are stationed. Adversely, some critics argue military, particularly military technological cooperation, is conducted purely on a level of national interest, and that cooperation between Britain and the United States has only occurred when both felt that their interests, or themselves, were threatened by a common enemy, or when cooperation would provide clear-cut benefits to both states. Baylis argues that the Anglo-American nuclear partnership that was "one of the core elements of the 'special relationship'" was "maintained primarily as a result of reciprocity rather than sentimental attachment or vague notions of kinship"[13]. Dumbrell expands on Baylis' purely self-interested thesis, arguing that "though driven by common interests, [the special relationship] was nevertheless sustained by cultural sharing, by personal friendships, by institutionalised exchange of

How Important are Shared Culture, Language and Values to the 'special relationship' between E

Written by Oliver Lewis

information and by complex and sturdy networks of military and diplomatic cooperation"[14]. Personal networks and friendships have often been perceived as of prominent importance in the strength and nature of the 'special relationship', and these two can be impacted by the influence of shared cultural experiences between decision-makers.

"He responded to the British love of culture and literature" remarked Rose Kennedy of her son, John F. Kennedy, and "he did enjoy seeing all the beautiful [English country] houses, because they were connected more or less with history"[15]. John Fair, in examining the intellectual components of President Kennedy, highlights that Kennedy was deeply interested in history and its "relationship to current policy"[16] and crucially, that a great deal of the historical analogies he used were taken from British history and from British statesman: "Despite his Irish ancestry, the intellectual predispositions that he incorporated into his public policy were deeply embedded in British (perhaps even Whig) history"[17] and that it "was his storehouse of knowledge, chiefly historical and British, that Kennedy brought to bear in resolving the crises that confronted his administration"[18]. Transcending many generations, one can draw a likeness between Kennedy's intellectual leanings and that of the founding members of the revolution and the impact that Whig thought had upon them. Clearly, British culture continues to have a great impact on the personal and political conduct of American Presidents, which directly affects the 'special relationship' between the two countries. The Kennedy example provides one with insights into the importance of a shared heritage of art and literature, as the President was an avid reader of the classics of English literature, and many such examples continue to be key elements of the American education establishment (a commonality of language once again provides avenues for increased cultural exchange). The personal friendship between President Kennedy and Prime Minister Macmillan can be contributed in part, claims Fair, because the President had "cultivated in his youth the works of Cecil, Buchan, and Churchill" and the Macmillan's political ideology was broadly 'Churchillian', and had gained Kennedy's respect through his "role as one of the leading anti-appeasers during the 1930s"[19]. Furthermore, the institutionalised exchange of information between the US and the UK which Dumbrell identifies as crucial to the special relationship, is mirrored in the academic exchanges that leading intellectuals and promising students from both sides of the Atlantic take part in: The Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University has been awarded to many individuals who went on to high-level political positions within the United States, including President Clinton and Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

Therefore, it can be effectively argued that the shared culture, language and values between Britain and the United States are vitally important to the 'special relationship' between the two countries. Without the added cultural component, there would be little opportunity for the level of intimacy necessary to declare transatlantic relations as 'special', for then the United States would simply be conducting its foreign policy orientation towards Britain solely on

How Important are Shared Culture, Language and Values to the 'special relationship' between E

Written by Oliver Lewis

the strength of perceived benefits and national interest, which is how it is seen to conduct relations with most other foreign powers. The common origins of the British and American people contribute largely to the 'sentimentality' identified with the 'special relationship', but there are concrete examples where a common language, culture and values have explicitly influence the direction of American policy. To what extent it can continue to do so given the massive disproportionate power between the United Kingdom and the United States, is now the question to consider.

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[6] Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*: 3.

[7] Onuf, *Declaration of Independence*: 71.

[8] *Ibid*: 83.

[9] Ashton, N. (2005), 'Harold Macmillan and the "Golden Days" of Anglo-American Relations Revisited, 1957-63'. *Diplomatic History* 29 (4): 711.

[10] Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*: 4.

How Important are Shared Culture, Language and Values to the 'special relationship' between E

Written by Oliver Lewis

[11] *Ibid.*: 4.

[12] *Ibid.*: 6.

[13] Baylis, J. (2001), 'Exchanging Nuclear Secrets: Laying the Foundations of the Anglo-American Nuclear Relationship'. *Diplomatic History* 25 (1): 54.

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[16] *Ibid.*: 119.

[17] *Ibid.*: 121.

[18] *Ibid.*: 133.

[19] Ashton, *Harold Macmillan*: 697.

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