

Mind the Gap: The Danger of Anglo-American Division

Woodrow Wilson once proclaimed that America was the only idealistic nation in the world. Contained within that statement is the recognition that, perhaps, America's vision has a tendency to become decoupled from reality. Woodrow's laudatory remarks subsequently turned to the fear that America might lack the ability to perceive the gap between the achievable and the desirable: what the US Ambassador, in a recent defence of the Special Relationship, simply called 'perspective'.¹ By contrast, the Britton has a clear eye on a cloudy day,² is the political tonic to the half-full hi-ball and the counterpoint to over-ambition, ever-mindful of the 'gap' that the spirited Yank is liable to lose his footing in.

Of course 2013 is not the first time that the last rites of the Special Relationship have been chanted. Much was made of Harold Wilson's resistance to Lyndon B. Johnson's pressure for involvement in the Vietnam War. Yet the prophesying then, as now, came from a conflation of the Special Relationship and identical foreign policy: the existence of the former does not demand the latter. Any relationship is equivocal, and may oscillate between chord and discord, and yet for it to be 'special' it must persist not in spite of, but regardless of, this dynamic. A special relationship gives license to unilateral action outside of the Palmerstonian calculus of interest.³ And as the negative reaction to Tony Blair's support of American foreign policy proved, it is when *raison d'état* loom larger than shared values that the Special Relationship finds itself on shaky ground. For it is then that the concept of an 'Anglo-American' anything is reduced to mere language.

But beyond a shared language, beyond the odd gentlemanly agreement to disagree, what does, and what will, the Special Relationship mean? As the US Ambassador has written, it begins with a shared culture and therefore added insight into each other's motivations and goals. These of course will continue to align and diverge in the 21st century as they did in the 20th, but as is the case now with Syria, the 'specialness' of the relationship will become most evident at times of divergence. As the Assad regime engages in brinkmanship, Britain does not simply watch America with a dispassionate eye, caring only about the hard effects of each White House decision. Even after having washed its hands of military action, the significance of the situation for Britain remains undiminished, perhaps because America is in no small way emblematic of our culture and our values. No one felt as bitterly disappointed or as sheepishly redundant as America and Britain respectively over Westminster's decision not to support action in Syria. The world waited with bated breath not for the concrete but rather the abstract significance of the decision: not because the presence or absence of British boots-on-the-ground would make a material difference to America's ability to prosecute a military strike, but because the

¹ Matthew Barzun, 'The special relationship still lives on between Britain and the US', *The Observer* (7 September 2013)

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, Speech at Manchester, November 1847, in *English Traits*, (1883), 295

³ Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston, *Hansard*, 1 (March 1848), col. 122

decision would have a disproportionately large effect on America's *perceived* freedom of action. The abstract governs the act.

In the instance of Syria, it is a testament to the vitality of the Special Relationship that Britain found the capacity to make a decision independent of the United States' wishes. As this isolationist stance does not tangibly affect the physical capability of the US – and one must not be under the illusion that this has not in fact been the case for many years – its importance must therefore reside in precisely this abstract, psychological sphere. The Special Relationship will continue to have global impact as long as Britain and America (both their publics and their governments) respond to each other with that heightened sensitivity so natural between those who feel culturally, historically, linguistically 'bound'. Nor will the Special Relationship remain hermetically sealed from other countries' politics: as we have already seen even America's momentum begins to lose traction without British sanction, superpower or not.

In the past, the Anglo-American partnership may have weighed in at more than the sum of its parts in the international ring. Today, in front of an audience attuned to division in the West, both Britain and America may have to accept that any differences on international affairs might automatically hamstring the intentions of each individually. Perhaps more than ever, the Special Relationship will become increasingly important for the credibility of the leadership of the free world.