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Review by Robert M. Hendershot, Grand Rapids Community College

This recent contribution of Alan Dobson and Steve Marsh to *The International History Review* is ultimately a significant rebuttal to the ubiquitous declarations that the Anglo-American special relationship is either dead or currently in its death throes. Indeed, public discourse on the special relationship is often dominated by what Dobson and Marsh refer to as the “terminalist” school – which is comprised of some government officials, innumerable journalists, and more than a few academics – who cite the growing inequality of the relationship, various “snubgates,” squabbles over policy and procedure in Iraq and Afghanistan, America’s growing penchant for labeling various international partnerships as “special,” and the shifting priorities of President Barack Obama’s administration, i.e. towards Asia, as evidence that the classic Anglo-American alliance is over. (676) After surveying the various arguments employed by the “terminalists” to make their case against the alliance, Dobson and Marsh go on to skillfully use primary and secondary sources to tell a very different story.

Though the authors themselves refer to their position as “rather unfashionable” (674), their article’s direct and well-substantiated thesis is perhaps better described as a necessary and refreshing historiographical countercurrent, one with the potential to breathe new life into the study of American and British foreign relations. In short, the authors argue that the Anglo-American special relationship is healthier than

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contemporary terminalist-dominated commentary would have us believe, and that the alliance is likely to survive beyond the Obama era and continue to be an important aspect of international relations in the future. To make their case, they structure the article in four parts, which the authors describe as “the weight of history; the canons of international-relations theory; the importance of considering interest and sentiment in explaining the special relationship’s resilience; and a relativist argument that suggests the United States still really does have no better ally than the United Kingdom.”

Historically, at least, declarations of the relationship’s demise have been common in each generation, as well as generally reactionary rather than nuanced, based upon a particular crisis or statement rather than assessments of the broader historic, strategic, and cultural contexts. The article illustrates numerous examples of this dynamic, with particular attention to the apparent disappearance of the special relationship during the 1956 Suez Crisis, the lack of joint military action during the American war in Vietnam, and post-Cold War opinions that the end of that period would eliminate the alliance’s reason for existence. In all examples, a chorus of voices arose to declare the special relationship over, hollow, or simply “little more than sentimental terminology.” Yet in each case the detractors were ultimately incorrect, and the alliance endured (only to be declared dead again another day). In this way, “the weight of history” is used to create a powerful point of caution for anyone considering similar declarations in the present. Dobson and Marsh are convincing when they conclude that history “teaches us two lessons in equal measure. First, it is periodically fashionable to administer the special relationship its last rites - it sells newspapers, fashions careers, and is a cause célèbre of advocates of Britain’s European vocation. Second, the special relationship has to date demonstrated a Lazarus-like capacity to weather adversity, to reinvent itself, and to confound those who seek to consign it to history.”

Moving beyond history and into contemporary Anglo-American relations, Dobson and Marsh test the specialness of alliance by comparing it to the “cannons of Realism.” In international-relations theory, realism asserts that all states aspire to maximize their own power and security, that trust between nations is nebulous and always transitory, and that a nation’s defensive weapons must always be viewed by other countries as potential offensive weapons. To demonstrate that the special relationship effectively disregards these cannons of realism, and thus may be termed truly special, the article highlights the intimate degree of nuclear weapons sharing between the Americans and the British both during the Cold War and afterward. That the United States routinely shared weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems with the British after 1962, and agreed that these could be used independently by Britain, without any tangible selfish strategic reasons for doing so, certainly bolsters the argument being made here. Moreover, realist theory would suggest that such sharing ought to have stopped when the Soviet threat dissolved in the early 1990s, yet the opposite occurred and nuclear sharing has actually intensified rather than abated since the end of the Cold War.

The “special” terminology is validated in other ways as well. Rejecting the traditional dichotomy of causation arguments in Anglo-American alliance politics, namely that either sentiment or interest must be the root of the matter, the authors reimagine these concepts and conclude that separating strategic agendas from sentiment is a flawed exercise. Rather, these two factors of causation have become so intertwined since the Second World War as to become virtually inseparable. Put simply, that which “comes to be seen as an interest is often moulded by common sentiment and the existence of friendly sentiments often leads on to common

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interests.” (683) For example, the authors point out that Britain’s political elite has often been wary of centering UK foreign policy too much on partnership with Europe and has preferred instead to hold fast the U.S. and play the role of a key transatlantic bridge uniting the Western alliance. Likewise, the authors relay public opinion data suggesting that the United States government is compelled to maintain close ties with the United Kingdom because the American public attaches unique importance to British partnership. (683-687).

A relativist argument is also used to refute claims of the special relationship’s end. Compared to America’s other allies, Britain, with its military strength, strategic interests, and economic capabilities, continues to justify its special status. For example, in 2011 the United Kingdom’s military expenditure was still the fourth highest in the world, with only the United States, Russia, and China spending more. Though the defense budget cuts Britain announced in 2010 generated considerable American criticism as well as the predictable claims that the special relationship was finished (687), a longue durée analysis of Anglo-American partnership suggests that such criticism stems from the perceived importance rather than the irrelevance of Britain.

One of the most intriguing parts of the article summarizes data indicating the high degree of interconnection between the British and the Americans at all levels. Statistics show the continuing importance of Anglo-American trade, the high degree of foreign investment in one another’s economies, the similarities in their venture-capital markets, the millions of American and British workers residing within one another’s borders, the millions of tourists the countries exchange each year, their international student exchange, and even the high percentage of former Rhodes Scholars working at various levels of the U.S. government. The authors insist that “These are ties that bind.” (684) Yet while the data presented is highly intriguing, and certainly suggestive of unique levels of Anglo-American connection, additional context and comparative data will be needed in future to draw fully effective conclusions. One hopes that articles such as this one will inspire other scholars to take up this challenge and continue to explore the nuances of Anglo-American connections and partnership, past and present.

Finally, Dobson and Marsh have synthesized a theoretical framework that such scholars may find very useful indeed. In their analysis, the special relationship is largely the result of a shared Anglo-American worldview that exists on a fundamental level, and we must see the alliance not as something maintained by both governments to secure a finite list of particular returns or favors, but rather as the result of both nations attempting to preserve an international system that benefits them both. This system, fashioned chiefly by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill during the Second World War, saw a declining Britain tie its fortunes to the United States in order to preserve strategic interests and values. Again, sentiment and interest are intertwined: “the same values that help bind the UK and US together are those that both countries seek to export globally in the defense and shaping of an international system that they forged together in the Second World War.” And as a result, “the biggest loss Britain could now experience of the special relationship is if the United States drops the ball in the twenty-first century. Conversely, the more that the United States can preserve of an international system that Britain not only benefits from but enjoys disproportionate influence within, then the more reciprocity - however unseen - will course through the veins of the special relationship.” (691-692)

This is a great time to be a reader interested in the past, present, and future of the Anglo-American special relationship. Those wishing to read more about the issues discussed here can easily find additional related works by both Dobson and Marsh, as well as a variety of recent works on the power of culture in transatlantic
diplomacy, identity theory, and soft power that have appeared in recent years. Of course, one would do well to explore the terminalist analysis as well, which is perhaps best laid out in the works of Alex Danchev. All these excellent publications are a great sign of the vitality of this field right now, and suggest an exciting future for studies that continue to explore the complexities and nuances of British and American diplomacy.

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