

The Pilgrims Society: A Special Relationship Between Great Britain and the United States

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One hundred and ten years ago, on the eve of his coronation, Edward VII had appendicitis. The coronation was postponed for six weeks. In those days, ocean travel was the only transportation link between Great Britain and its former colony. Many Americans were in London for the coronation—an event that they had never seen since Queen Victoria’s reign had lasted 64 years—so during this unplanned interval, they had lunches, and dinners, and dinners and lunches—and at one of them, on the very eve of the Royal event, a hundred Englishmen and Americans who saw in the greater alliance of their two countries the possibilities of a better world, forged the structure of the Pilgrims Society, an organization to exist separately in London and New York with the mutual purpose of “promoting the brotherhood among nations especially the United States and the British Empire.” In its illustrious history, Presidents, Prime Ministers, and Reigning Sovereigns have praised the Pilgrims Society’s role as an advocate of the Special Relationship between Britain and America.

Of course, the steel that binds us is our common language which the British speak brilliantly and which we carry on. I had an early opportunity to learn the devastating advantage Shakespeare gave his countrymen.

At college, I was a participant in the debate between American universities and Oxford. We were given two topics to discuss. One was: Columbus Went Too Far. We chose the alternative which was: Resolved, The World Would Be Better Off Had Not the Thirteen Colonies Broken Away From the British Empire—an honest subject worthy of discussion. In American debaters’ style, I listed my arguments and left it to my peroration to put an unanswerable conclusion. I said something like: ‘As Thomas Jefferson said, the tree of liberty is watered by the blood of patriots. And the tree of liberty which America planted and has nurtured so carefully has seen its seeds distributed about the world. The harvest of freedom is our own.’ The Oxford representative looked at me with some concern and then replied: “Having listened to Mr. vanden Heuvel’s extraordinary agricultural experiments...” We won the debate but they won the audience.

In this essay, I will describe my favorite Pilgrim subject—the Special Relationship between Great Britain and the United States which was very much the creation of Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In 1939, Roosevelt’s instinct was that Churchill was the only leader who could save Britain from Nazi conquest. It is impossible to imagine a Special Relationship in the context of Neville Chamberlain and Franklin Roosevelt, or obversely, Winston Churchill and John Nance Garner. It took the immense personalities of Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt—and more, the shared understanding of the

forces threatening their world that caused this historic relationship to be born. In May 1940, Churchill became Prime Minister. The collapse of France galvanized the situation and forced millions of Americans to understand that England, standing alone, was on the brink of disaster.

There is perhaps no other instance in history, as Stalin said at Yalta about Churchill, when the future of the world depended on the courage of one man.

Also, in 1940, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to an unprecedented third term as President of the United States. Although more than a year would pass before Pearl Harbor brought us into the war, Roosevelt engineered America's response to Britain's danger by sending 50 destroyers which were critical to England's survival. He proposed Lend Lease—acknowledging Britain's near bankruptcy—and Churchill described it as the most generous act in history. They met in the waters off Newfoundland and declared the Atlantic Charter, a document based on the Four Freedoms which the President had enunciated in his historic speech to Congress on January 6, 1941, where he made clear that the terrible cost of the war which he knew would engulf America could only be justified if a new and better world would emerge, a world based on four core values of democracy: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. All this in support of Britain—and America was not yet in the war and significant domestic forces opposed Roosevelt at every step.

The cost of World War II is almost beyond belief. More than 67 million people were killed; more than 80 percent of those casualties were civilian. Cities, towns, and countries were ravaged and destroyed. The Holocaust became one of the darkest pages in history. Nations were bankrupted as the remorseless cost of war absorbed their wealth and their treasures.

The Special Relationship was a legacy of World War II. As we review it today we can see that there are at least three essential requirements for it to exist and to prosper. First, there must be significant personalities, leaders of character and integrity in both countries, who share a great purpose and a clear vision of the world that they will influence. Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt were such personalities. Second, these leaders must have political power built on a strong, popular base; and, third, they must have a clear understanding of their own national interests which they believe will be protected and enhanced by their partnership.

The Special Relationship has had some difficult days. President Eisenhower during the Suez crisis in 1956 made very clear that the Special Relationship would only be sustained if the United States regarded any policy to be pursued to be in the American interest—and only the United States would define that interest.

The war in Vietnam strained the relationship. Prime Minister Harold Wilson refused to send British troops to a battlefield of a conflict he believed was against both British and American interests. President Johnson treated Wilson with disdain and anger. The Prime Minister was not intimidated.

The Special Relationship was born again in the ideological affinity and personal chemistry of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. It survived despite the gratuitous invasion of Grenada and our less than helpful “support” of Prime Minister Thatcher during the Falklands War. But they were two extraordinary political leaders who knew how to work together and who both enjoyed and admired each other.

Regarding the Iraq war—another time of strain between our countries—we will leave it to history to understand why Prime Minister Blair chose to be an enabler of that war. Instead, he could have educated us on the earlier calamitous experience of the British in Iraq about which Winston Churchill in 1922 said: “We can’t go back and must go on. Financially it is ruinous. Morally it is wicked. Militarily it is an open question, and politically it is a blunder.”

The Pilgrims Society will certainly continue as a principal advocate of the Special Relationship. It will be remembered too through the magnificent memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt designed by Louis Kahn, an iconic architect of the 20th century, that was completed recently on Roosevelt Island and soon to be dedicated as the Four Freedoms Park.

Winston Churchill spoke of President Roosevelt as the greatest man he had ever known. As we dedicate the Four Freedoms Park, we will recall Churchill’s description of his partner in the Special Relationship that saved our world:

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the greatest American friend that Britain ever found and the foremost champion of freedom and justice whoever stretched strong hands across the oceans to rescue Europe and Asia from tyranny and destruction...He changed, he altered, decisively and permanently the social axis, the moral axis of Mankind by involving the new world inexorably and irrevocably in the fortunes of the old. His life must therefore be regarded as one of the commanding events in human history.¹

While the world’s power balances have changed between our countries—Britain decimated by war, American exalted by its rendezvous with destiny, but the real meaning of the Special Relationship should not alone be our economic and military interests—the real measure of the Special Relationship should reflect our common fidelity to the rule of law, to our magnificent, shared cultural legacy, and foremost, to our commitment to democracy, a commitment constantly renewed, proudly taught to our children, and through future generations made forever strong. Great Britain and the United States, dedicated to that purpose, will always be together.*

¹ Winston Churchill, Eulogy to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 17 April 1945, House of Commons.

* *Editor’s Note:* This piece is based on a May 1, 2012 speech to the Union League Club of New York City delivered by the author on the occasion of his acceptance of the United States’ Medallion for Service to the Nation presented by the Pilgrims Society.