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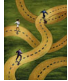

IN MARCH 2001, the once youthful but now veteran Tory politician William Hague gave a speech at a Conservative Party conference in which he banged the anti-European drum. In March 2003, he gave another speech, in Parliament, in which he warmly endorsed Tony Blair's support for the American invasion of Iraq. In July 2010, he spoke once more, this time in the celebrated Locarno Room at the Foreign Office. But his tune had changed: like Prime Minister David Cameron, now–Foreign Secretary Hague has intimated that he seeks to distance Britain from reflexive support for Washington, and he says that, in a new multipolar world, he wants to move more generally from an obsession with the "blocs"—the United States, Europe and the Middle East—to forge fresh links with such emerging powerhouses as India, China and Brazil.

What a difference a few years make! Not only has Hague's career turned out in ways he did not foresee, and certainly didn't intend, the world has quite tilted on its axis. Few things have been more affected by those changes than British foreign policy, in particular the connection with the United States, often called the "special relationship," whether the phrase is apt, or even has any meaning. After many vicissitudes, this relationship reached an apotheosis of sorts when Tony Blair took a largely unwilling country into the Iraq War, for a variety of motives, but above all because of a belief that he ought to support the United States in all its actions. Although Blair didn't quite say "their country, right or wrong," that was the clear implication of his position—and Hague's at that time.

It may have been the implication of the British position for more than half a century. And that supposed special relationship increasingly looks like the *grande illusion* of British foreign policy, logically false and founded on a complete misunderstanding: a relationship which was special mainly in that only one side knew it existed. By now even Hague seems to understand this.

Having become an MP in 1989 while still in his twenties, Hague served briefly as a junior minister and then a cabinet minister in the dying days of the last Tory government under John Major. When the Tories were routed by Tony Blair and his New Labour Party in the 1997 general election, Major resigned immediately as party leader and Hague was elected in his place. His task was thankless, as Blair rode the high crest of a wave of popularity which many British people now look back on with a collective blush. Hague's response was to move the party to the Right, with a renewed Euroskepticism, as it is called, though the honorable word

“skeptic” doesn’t deserve to be appropriated for sour and sterile hostility to the European Union. “Talk about Europe and they call you extreme,” Hague said sarcastically in that 2001 speech. “Talk about tax and they call you greedy. Talk about crime and they call you reactionary. Talk about asylum and they call you racist.” Well yes, and there was an unmistakable streak of demagogic xenophobia bordering on bigotry running through the Tory party at that time.

What’s more, it didn’t work. Shortly after those words were spoken, the Tories were led by Hague into another election, and were again heavily defeated. Hague not only resigned the leadership but departed from front-bench politics for the time being to devote himself to making money and writing books, both of which he did to some effect. He’s an able man—an Oxford “First,” like Cameron—and his biographies of William Pitt the Younger, prime minister at the end of the eighteenth century, and the English abolitionist William Wilberforce are worth reading.

It was thus as a backbencher that Hague spoke on March 18, 2003, in support of the invasion of Iraq; his speech now seems a period piece. “Munich” has been used to justify every military intervention from Suez to Vietnam to Iraq, and Hague seemed to acknowledge the danger of this when he agreed that “analogies with the 30s can be taken too far,” but then spoiled it by saying that “in some of the opposition to the Government’s stance there is a hint of appeasement.” More than that, Hague’s case was that it was “part of our national interest to act in concert with the United States of America in matters of world peace and stability.”

Seven years later, those are words which any British politician would hesitate to utter. The consequence of such acting in concert has not been a success. British troops withdrew from Basra in southern Iraq in late 2007, with little to celebrate and with much American acrimony. This July it was announced that the British would pull out of the Sangin area of Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan by the end of the year, again with little to celebrate, and Cameron has said that he wants all our troops home by 2015 at the latest, which as it happens may be the date of the next election.

Most Tory MPs, Cameron and Hague among them, voted for the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, along with a majority of Labour members. But 139 Labour MPs voted against it, the largest such rebellion within a governing party since the Liberal scission over home rule in 1886; added to the dissident minority was a small but notable group of Tories, including some former cabinet ministers, and every Liberal Democrat in Parliament. To be precise, the dissidents voted for an amendment which found “the case for military action against Iraq as yet unproven.”

Even at the time, with Blair and his Downing Street apparat doing everything they could to bulldoze the country into war, there were plenty of detached observers who agreed with those words; almost everyone would now say they were a plain statement of fact. Few any longer dispute that the Blair government shamelessly exaggerated and distorted intelligence, or think that Blair had any justification for his claim of a ‘‘serious and current’’ threat from Iraq—and no London politician would now say, as Blair did, that we had a national duty to support Washington.

Our new government is a coalition of Conservatives under Cameron and Liberal Democrats led by Nick Clegg. Last April, not long before the election, Clegg gave a speech to the Foreign Correspondents’ Association in London. “I think it’s sometimes rather embarrassing,” he said, “the way Conservative and Labour politicians talk in this kind of slavish way about the special relationship.” Cameron was already of this mind four years ago when he said, “We have never, until recently, been uncritical allies of America.” This was an undisguised rebuke, and was also factually true.

In his rather weird testimony to the Chilcot Iraq Inquiry which is investigating the British role in the war, Blair almost boasted that he had been determined to stick by the Americans at all times, but he also confessed that he was worried about being outbid by the Tories in devotion to Washington, which seems an unsatisfactory reason for going to war. Now we have a prime minister who has already criticized “neo-conservative thinking” and its belief “that pre-emptive military action is not only an appropriate, but a necessary component of tackling the terrorist threat.” Cameron amplified this when he said that “we cannot impose democracy at the barrel of a gun” and “we cannot drop democracy from 10,000 feet—and we shouldn’t try.” More than that, he says, in harmony with his new chum Clegg, that our relationship with Washington should be “solid but not slavish.”

WHAT’S REALLY curious is how it became so slavish, and the way this illusion has persisted, in defiance of historical fact. The British are far more prone than Americans to talk of the relationship as if it were an immemorial tradition, but there was an exception when Senator John McCain visited England four years ago. “The special relationship between our two countries will endure throughout the 21st century,” he ingratiatingly told an interviewer. “I say that with total confidence because it’s lasted for 200 years.”

History is evidently not McCain’s strong suit. Following the creation of the American Republic by a rebellion against the English Crown, carried out by men such as Jefferson, who said of England that he would “lend my hand to sink the whole island in the ocean,” the United States minded its own business for generations. For all the ingenious attempts by such

neoconservative historians as Robert Kagan and Michael Oren to prove that America was a global player from the start, the fact is that for 140 years after the Declaration of Independence no American troops set foot in Europe. Not only did American and British soldiers never once fight together during that time, the two countries in fact fought one war against each other in the nineteenth century and almost came to blows thrice more.

If McCain's "200 years" is serious, then it would take us back to 1812—and the beginning of a war which saw British troops burn Washington and Andrew Jackson make his name by defeating the redcoats at New Orleans. With a large part of the British Army thereafter stationed in Canada to protect it from its southern neighbor, Sir Robert Peel warned Parliament in 1849 about the imminent danger of an American war over the Oregon border. During the Civil War, Secretary of State William Seward wanted to declare war on England and was restrained only by Lincoln himself ("One war at a time, Mr. Seward"). And in a bitter dispute after the war about a Confederate warship built in England, a Massachusetts senator demanded as recompense a sum equivalent to several billion dollars today, or alternatively the cession of Canada, which remained a long-standing territorial ambition for many Americans.

Despite that, it became a principle of British policy to remain on good terms with Washington, even when that meant restraint and concession, as it did in late 1895. President Grover Cleveland rattled his saber over an incomprehensible border dispute between Venezuela and British Guiana, and only forbearance on the part of Lord Salisbury's government defused the conflict before a shot was fired. It was recorded at the time that, while the English were dismayed by the thought of a war with the United States, in America, a war with England would be more popular than any other.

On the other hand, the Americans were chastened during that crisis by a precipitous fall of American stock on the London Exchange, though this was caused as much by skepticism about American financial reliability as by political considerations. Either way, this was a reminder that, though the two countries were increasingly economic rivals, the United States remained into the twentieth century in some ways a financial as well as a cultural dependency of England. The explosive industrial development of the Gilded Age was fueled by cheap immigrant labor—and by capital from the City of London. This only increased an American resentment of which many Englishmen were unaware.

The minister technically responsible for British Guiana during the border crisis was the colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain. A few years earlier he had been sent to Washington to settle a fisheries dispute, and while there Chamberlain had formed his own special relationship by marrying Mary Endicott, whose father, William Crowninshield Endicott, became secretary of war

during Cleveland's first term. This was his third marriage: two wives had died young after giving birth to sons, so that the Chamberlain half brothers, Austen and Neville, the one foreign secretary in the 1920s and the other prime minister in the 1930s, had an American stepmother.

No doubt influenced by his own circumstances, Joseph Chamberlain said, "I refuse to think or speak of the United States as a foreign nation." His words might have been echoed by many later British leaders down to Blair, but this quaint sentiment was rarely reciprocated. When Senator Barack Obama, as he was then, visited London in the summer of 2008, he very briefly met Cameron. The leader of the opposition gave him some CDs of English rock bands (I weep for my country) and a copy of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, Churchill's worst book, and one whose underlying argument that Britons and Americans were destined to rule the world would give Obama little pleasure. He might wonder whether these "English-speaking peoples" included Kenyans (or Indians or West Indians) who speak English, or whether the concept isn't a genteel version of Kipling's "White Man's Burden."

ONE ENTHUSIAST for the special relationship is the self-proclaimed "very right-wing" historian Andrew Roberts. He alternates between serious works of scholarship and potboilers, notable in the latter category *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*, whose title deliberately echoed Churchill. It briefly made him historiographer to the Bush administration, as he described in a memorable account of his American book tour in 2007:

Harry Evans and Tina Brown gave a dinner for 50 at their apartment on the Upper East Side.... The following night Henry and Nancy Kissinger gave a dinner party at their apartment.... [the guests included] Rupert Murdoch... charming, witty, good-natured.... Flew to Washington.... Irwin Stelzer gave a big party at the Metropolitan Club for me, and his friends Irving and Bea Kristol, Charles Krauthammer, Richard Perle.... The next morning, after my lecture to White House staffers.... we were ushered in [to the Oval Office where].... I had 40 minutes alone with the Leader of the Free World, talking about the war on terror.... Lunch in the rarely-used Old Family Dining Room included Karl Rove, National Security Advisor Steve Hadley, White House Chief of Staff Josh Bolten.... I sat next to Dick Cheney (who had been photographed holding my book the previous day).

This relationship was special indeed, and Roberts's book may have been the last that will ever purvey such a travesty of history: the notion that the British and Americans fought together throughout the twentieth century. As late as 1914, when the first great war of the century began, not only did President Woodrow Wilson wonder whether he might not have to go to war against Great Britain (and for the same reason that had impelled his fellow Princetonian James Madison in 1812, the British naval blockade), but at the outset of the war it was again reckoned that more

Americans would have wanted to fight against the British than with them.

In the end, the United States did enter the Great War in April 1917, and the U.S. Army did take part in serious fighting on the Western Front from the following March (though not before). By the end of the war many Americans had had quite enough. The United States retreated inward, with the Senate vetoing membership in the League of Nations, Woodrow Wilson's brainchild, and also slammed America's doors shut on immigrants for decades to come.

After twenty isolated years the United States entered the next great conflict as well, but only in December 1941, when Great Britain had been at war for two-and-a-quarter years, and then because Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and Hitler declared war on the United States (and not the other way round, be it remembered). In his most exalted "special relationship" mode after 9/11, Blair told the people of New York that:

My father's generation went through the Blitz. They know what it is like to suffer this deep tragedy and attack. There was one country and one people which stood by us at that time. That country was America and those people were the American people.

This was wondrously rewritten history even by his standards. During the bombing of London and other British cities from the autumn of 1940 until the spring of 1941 which we called the Blitz, very many people stood side by side with the British: the Commonwealth countries, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa; the great Indian Army entirely composed of volunteers; the conquered and occupied countries whose governments were exiled in London and whose fighting forces were shedding blood alongside their British comrades; and far from least, Greece, which was heroically defending its soil against the Axis that winter.

All in all, and with the notable exception of Soviet Russia, that other sleeping giant that wanted only to be left alone, it's hard to recall any important country that didn't stand "by us" that winter apart from the United States, conspicuously and profitably neutral. Blair's preposterous words would not matter so much if they had not underlain the gravest decision and worst mistake by any prime minister in generations.

In 2003, Hague likewise spoke of the United States as the savior of mankind for its role in World War II: "Without America, France would have lived under dictatorship for decades.

Without America, the Germans would not have rescued themselves from a racist ideology." This is more nonsense. The simple truth that the Third Reich was defeated by the Red Army is now acknowledged by all serious military historians. That includes Roberts, whose next (and grown-up) book, *Masters and Commanders*, shows how great were the tension and rivalry between American and British leaders during that war.

Not that one would have learned this from Churchill's highly misleading book *The Second World War*, more polemical self-justification than serious history, which is not only grossly Anglocentric but also almost ignores the two great conflicts that actually took place from 1941 to 1945, between Germany and Russia, and between Japan and the United States. Considering that Churchill had an American mother, that he almost invented the concept of the English-speaking peoples and that much of his income came from American sources, his book might have paid more attention to the immense war in the Pacific.

IN THE case of one prime minister the relationship seemed special partly for personal reasons. Like Churchill, Harold Macmillan had an American mother, and like him, he made much of this addressing Congress as head of government. Though neither a notably successful premier in 1957–63 nor a particularly lovable man, Macmillan is a central figure in this story, and 1956 is a crucial date. That was the year that he sat in Sir Anthony Eden's government as chancellor of the exchequer while London cooked up the Suez adventure intended to recover the canal in conspiracy with the French and Israelis, only to find themselves caught out in their preposterous stunt. The Eisenhower administration pulled the financial rug from under the conspirators, who had most unwisely told Washington nothing of the plot to use an Israeli invasion of the Sinai as a pretext to send Anglo-French forces to Egypt. Macmillan's conduct during Suez had been unappealing, "first in, first out" in the lethal words of the later Labour leader Harold Wilson, meaning that Macmillan had been gung ho for action but then lost his nerve and demanded a halt by way of misinforming his cabinet colleagues. Just as important was the upshot: he and Charles de Gaulle shortly came to power on either side of the Channel, but they drew opposite conclusions from Suez.

Years before, when he was serving in North Africa as Churchill's wartime proconsul, Macmillan had said to a colleague that the English were "Greeks to their Romans," meaning in a patronizing way that the "great, big, vulgar, bustling" Americans needed to be guided by the English as the rulers of imperial Rome had been by worldly-wise Greek mentors (who were in fact slaves, making the comparison a little less happy). Now after Suez, Macmillan decided that these new Romans could not be gainsaid, and that the only British future was to act as a junior partner, in the hope of mentoring the Americans and perhaps sharing some of their glory.

But de Gaulle's view was quite different. During the war Churchill had told him that he—and England—would always choose the Americans against France, and de Gaulle had taken that to heart. Years later, in the wake of Suez, he decided that the United States could not be trusted, and that France must find another path in Europe. From this came the doctrine that would be known as Gaullism and all that followed, from the French nuclear weapon to the general's veto of British membership in what was then the Common Market. Looking back, it's hard to deny that de Gaulle was right, or at least that Macmillan was wrong.

Or so his own career demonstrated existentially. For nearly three years, from an inauguration in January 1961 until an assassination in November 1963, the relationship was peculiarly personal: not only was Macmillan half American, President John F. Kennedy's sister Kathleen had been married to Lord Hartington, who was the son of the Duke of Devonshire and the nephew of Lady Dorothy Macmillan, the prime minister's wife (Hartington was killed in action in 1944; his widow died in an air crash four years later). This only encouraged Macmillan's belief that he enjoyed an intimate friendship with the White House and that when he dealt with the young president he was playing the worldly-wise Greek mentor more than ever.

That was not how they saw it in the new Rome. During the Cuban missile crisis it became excruciatingly clear how little the White House cared about London. Over those dramatic days, when at one point U.S. Air Force Boeings loaded with nuclear bombs skirted the Arctic Circle on the second level of alert beneath war itself, and then when Robert Kennedy cut a secret deal with the Soviets by agreeing to withdraw American missiles from Turkey, the Greeks in Downing Street were not so much as informed, let alone consulted.

In his recent biography of Macmillan, Charles Williams puts his finger on the illusion. Like other prime ministers before and since, Macmillan persuaded himself that there was some mystical bond between the two countries, quite failing to see that "the United States, like all great powers, would in the end follow—without necessarily much regard for others—what it perceived from time to time to be its own interests."

AT MUCH this time, the very idea of the special relationship first began to be questioned. Kennedy was to decide in a rather patronizing way whether the British would obtain new advanced nuclear weaponry from the United States to replace their aging forces. Weeks after the Cuban crisis, in December 1962, just as Macmillan was going to Nassau to meet Kennedy and discuss this, Dean Acheson gave a famous speech at West Point, with one memorable and haunting phrase: "Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role." The imperious and clever Acheson, Harry Truman's secretary of state and still one of the oracles of American foreign policy, rubbed it in. The British were still trying "to play a separate power role . . . apart

from Europe, a role based on a ‘special relationship’ with the United States, a role based on being the head of a ‘commonwealth’ which has no political structure, unity, or strength.” This role, said Acheson bluntly, “is about played out.”

What’s more, some Englishmen were coming to agree with him. Macmillan resigned as prime minister in October 1963 and was succeeded by Sir Alec Douglas-Home, in what proved the last gasp for the patrician old guard. A year later Home lost the election to Labour under Harold Wilson, who continued using the language of Anglo-American amity in theory, sycophantically telling President Lyndon Johnson that he came from Yorkshire, the “Texas of England,” and inviting Johnson’s successor, President Richard Nixon, to look in on a cabinet meeting at Number 10 Downing Street (the notoriously clumsy Nixon marked the occasion by knocking over an old-fashioned inkwell on the hallowed cabinet table).

But in one crucial respect theory did not translate into practice. When Johnson began to escalate the Vietnam War he asked friendly countries to contribute troops, so as to show that the war was being waged by what might have been called a coalition of the willing. Australian and Thai soldiers did fight in Vietnam. British soldiers did not. Wilson angered his own left wing by expressing sympathy for the Americans in their struggle against Ho Chi Minh, but he adroitly avoided any military commitment, to American rage. And an English visitor to Washington a few years later was berated by Secretary of State Dean Rusk with the words “All we wanted was one goddamn battalion of the Black Watch.”

During his speech supporting the Iraq War, Hague was asked by another MP if his belief in the need always to act in concert with the United States meant that he would have supported participation in the Vietnam War. He eloquently made no reply. Another Tory was less reticent. At the 1966 party conference, the Tories, in opposition at the time, were told emphatically to have nothing to do with the Vietnam War by their defense spokesman, Enoch Powell.

By then there was a new Tory leader: Edward Heath had succeeded Home in 1965. Although Heath’s ten-year party leadership (and less than four years as prime minister) cannot possibly be counted a success, for the Tories or the country, it did mark, at least for a time, a sharp turn in British policy. In the spring of 1967, as leader of the opposition, Heath was asked to lecture at Harvard, and he continued where Acheson had left off by dismissing “the so-called special relationship between Britain and the United States.” He discussed the reorientation of American strategic priorities away from Europe to East Asia, British withdrawal from east of Suez and the decline of her role as leader of the commonwealth.

All these marked a “shift in power in the modern world” to which a future British government would have to adjust. After Heath won the 1970 election, he followed his logic by standing back from the American embrace and making another attempt to join the European Community, this time successfully. Then, after the unhappy return to power of Labour in 1974, the Tories won a watershed election in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher, and less than two years later Ronald Reagan was in the White House.

Plenty of cheerleading books have been written about Reagan and Thatcher, whose partnership was certainly often close, and the 1980s did in fact end with the fall of the Berlin wall and then the implosion of Soviet Russia. And yet the seeming affection between president and prime minister concealed many differences, as in 1982, when Washington by no means offered immediate and unwavering support for London after Argentine forces invaded the Falkland Islands.

One forceful figure in the Reagan administration was Jeane Kirkpatrick. She distinguished between totalitarian regimes, which were unreservedly bad, and authoritarian regimes, with which Washington could do business—one such being the military junta in Buenos Aires at the time, which merely tortured and killed large numbers of people in an authoritarian way. She also argued that it was important for Washington to keep in with its Latin American neighbors, and although Reagan did not follow her advice, American support for Thatcher over the Falklands was a little ambiguous. Her own response to the American invasion of Grenada the following year was not ambiguous at all: she was enraged, and made that clear in private.

ALL THIS is the bitter experience from which Cameron and Hague have learned. They are not about to emerge as some Oxonian versions of Castro and Chávez, but they are politicians who have fought elections, and who must be aware of public opinion. They may also have a slightly better grasp of history than Blair, though that isn’t saying much.

The Iraq War is now regarded by most Americans as a mistake they would rather forget, and the fraudulent way by which their country was taken to war is bitterly resented. Whatever the administration’s present woes, and whatever the outcome of the midterm elections in November, Obama is most unlikely to be defeated in 2012 by a Republican who advocates invading another Middle Eastern country.

And yet, for all the obloquy directed against Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld, there was always an American case of sorts for the invasion. The United States is the surviving superpower, by

definition the hegemonic force in the Middle East; it has a vital economic interest in the control of oil, as well as another interest in the defense of Israel; the American people were traumatized after September 11 and needed national morale restored; Washington had unfinished business with Saddam Hussein.

None of that applied to the British. When all the specious, ostensible reasons they were given are discarded, the real motive was Blair's determination to support Washington at all times and at all costs. He was driven by his conviction (expressed to a journalist rather than to Parliament) that "it would be more damaging to long-term world peace and security if the Americans alone defeated Saddam Hussein," and he persuaded himself that he must embrace Bush so as to "keep the United States in the international system."

There was never any logic to that "more damaging." Either the American administration was doing something wise and virtuous, in which case it should have been supported for that reason, or something vicious and foolish, in which case it should have been restrained, or if necessary, disowned. Nor was there any more obligation for the British Army to join the invasion than there had been for it to fight in Vietnam; but Blair, unlike Wilson, did send a "goddamn battalion of the Black Watch," and rather more than that.

And he got absolutely nothing in return. His belief that he could bind the Bush administration into the international order, or exercise any "Greek" influence at all on the Americans, was frankly absurd. Just how absurd has become clear on the other side of the Atlantic in innumerable books about Iraq, which barely mention Blair, and from the evidence of one witness after another at the Chilcot Inquiry, all admitting in morose tones that London had no influence at all over the White House or the Pentagon.

Two eminent British diplomatists have spelled this out. Sir Rodric Braithwaite was ambassador to Moscow, and then chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee (as well as author of *Moscow 1941*, his excellent history of the Battle of Moscow). In a ferocious rebuke in the *Financial Times*, he wrote that:

Mr Blair's prime responsibility is to defend the interests of his own country. This he has signally failed to do ... he has manipulated public opinion, sent our soldiers into distant lands for ill-conceived purposes, misused the intelligence agencies to serve his ends and reduced the

Foreign Office to a demoralised cipher.... Mr Blair has done more damage to British interests in the Middle East than Anthony Eden, who led the UK to disaster in Suez 50 years ago.

And although the Chilcot Inquiry testimony of Sir Christopher Meyer, the ambassador in Washington at the time the war began, has been called self-serving, he is plainly right to say that Blair failed to get any quid pro quo from Bush.

Addressing the Labour conference in the autumn of 2001, Blair spoke of “the starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan: they too are our cause.” Those words thrilled his slower-witted followers, who did not stop to ask whether the Bush administration also thought the wretched of Gaza were “our cause.” Blair assured his party that one beneficial side effect of the Iraq War would be to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Any such attempt on Blair’s part “failed miserably,” in Meyer’s brutal words.

“We could have achieved more by playing a tougher role,” Meyer said. Blair should have told Bush he would not commit British troops “unless we have palpable progress on the peace process.” In his speech commending the Iraq War, Hague made the far-fetched claim that every serious effort to advance peace in the Middle East had been made by Washington. This July he said that “time is running out to secure a two state solution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict,” leaving his listeners to decide who had let the time run out.

ALTHOUGH BRITISH and American politicians, including Obama, still intone the words “special relationship,” nearly fifty years after Acheson derided the phrase, it looks more foolish all the time. While the new foreign secretary inevitably pays lip service to “our unbreakable alliance with the United States,” it is a new and chastened William Hague who says that the last government “neglected to lift its eyes to the wider strategic needs of this country, to take stock of British interests, and to determine in a systematic fashion what we must do as a nation if we are to secure our international influence and earn our living in a world that is rapidly changing.” All in all, Hague agrees with Braithwaite that the Labour government had failed to protect the British national interest.

Funnily enough, most of these points had been made by an earlier Tory prime minister. Mrs. Thatcher wasn’t quite an English de Gaulle, but in her heart she agreed with the Victorian Prime Minister Lord Palmerston when he said that England has no eternal friends and no eternal foes, only eternal interests. Some of her American admirers may not be aware that she angrily

rebuked the Americans, in the form of George Shultz, Reagan's secretary of state, when they met in 1986, about the way that unconditional American support for Israel prevented any just settlement and imperiled peace throughout the Middle East.

Nor do those admirers cite the way Thatcher, well before the neoconservatives promoted their notion of preemptive war, argued that we should use force "to defend our way of life," but "we do not use it to walk into other people's countries, independent sovereign territories." One suspects that her American claque may not even know those words, or the way she continued so presciently: if a new law is ordained that wherever an evil regime holds sway, "the United States shall enter, then we are going to have really terrible wars in the world."

And for her friendship with Reagan, she had a far clearer view than Blair of the national interest, and duty. As Meyer said in his unkindest cut of all at Blair, "I think [Margaret Thatcher] would have insisted on a coherent political and diplomatic strategy." If Cameron and Hague now pursue such a plan, whatever sweet words they may say, it can only mean a relationship with the United States which is less "special," but more honest.

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