

Review - Anglo-American Relations

Written by Alanna O'Malley

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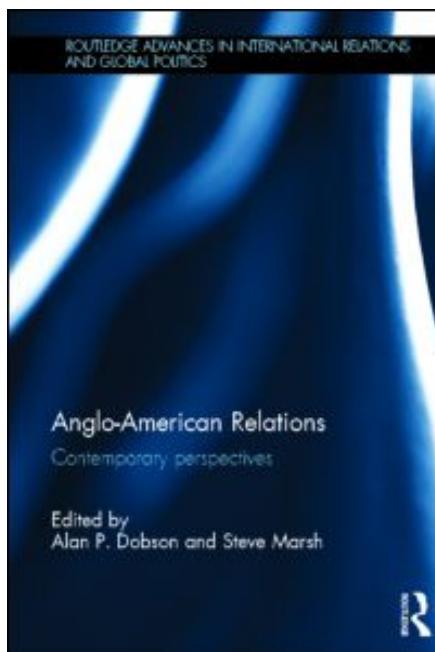
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ALANNA O'MALLEY, JUN 5 2013

Anglo-American Relations: Contemporary Perspectives

Edited by: Alan P. Dobson, Steve Marsh

Abingdon: Routledge, 2013



Writing in the Daily Telegraph recently, Niles Gardiner, a former aide to the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, detailed what he deemed to be “Barack Obama’s Top 10 Insults to Britain”.[1] Gardiner charges the Obama administration with displaying ‘sneering disdain and contempt’ for Britain and traces this attitude across a number of areas of foreign policy including the American support for Argentina over the Falkland’s issue, the snubbing of the funeral of Margaret Thatcher and the removal of a bust of former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill from the Oval Office. While the veracity of Gardiner’s claims that these actions constitute a rejection of the ‘special relationship’ by the Obama administration is not under scrutiny here, it does highlight how the lore and lure of the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’ remains a pertinent topic for scholars and the general public alike.

The validity of a new volume on the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’ can therefore be easily justified. What must be questioned however, especially in light of the current state of relations between Cameron and Obama, is the existence of a ‘special relationship’ between the two states. Indeed, editors themselves raise the question of the value of another book on Anglo-American relations in the introduction before attempting to quantify and substantiate the dimensions and areas of the Anglo-American relationship with an expansive collection of essays. They point out that no book length study of contemporary Anglo-American relations currently exists and they address the issue which has long plagued scholars of Anglo-American relations: Is there an Anglo-American Special Relationship? The book includes chapters addressing the classical ‘functionalist’ areas of cooperation between Britain and the United

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States, such as defence cooperation, nuclear collaboration and strategic and military coordination, but expands to cover a range of other spheres of joint action including cultural exploits, environmental politics and the influence of personal diplomacy between Presidents and Prime Ministers. However, what is the most interesting contribution of this volume to the broad field of literature on the Anglo-American relationship is the wide-ranging view of how the relationship functions, through what mechanisms or with which tools and why it is a source of persistent public fascination and intellectual intrigue.

The book essentially argues that: 'the Anglo-American Special Relationship can be better understood and defined through both an appreciation of the overall detailed complexity of its historical manifestation and a realisation that sentiments and interests cannot be usefully separated and by measuring the idea of a special relationship against canons and norms established by international relations theory.' (p.15) The contributions fit well together as they emphasise how interest and sentiment go hand in hand and are mutually reinforcing when it comes to the idea of special relations. The added value of this volume is that these essays are drawn from a selection of disciplines including economics, business studies and international relations, providing a persuasive interdisciplinary perspective.

The value of a bilateral partnership in an increasingly multi-lateral and globalised world is well-analysed. In particular Tony Jackson's contribution on the environment, which is notably the only chapter which does not conclude that there is a 'special' Anglo-American relationship in this area, assesses the difficulties of a bilateral relationship to operate in the context of transnational issues. Jackson argues that the governmental structure of the US, in combination with the international weight of the environmental issue means that it is very difficult for the United States to forge a 'special' relationship on this issue with the UK. Not only does Jackson do a particularly good job contextualising and conceptualising the relationship, his research and analysis on the environmental issues as an area of cooperation in Anglo-American relations is a fresh and exciting avenue of study in the field.

In general, the authors in the book deal well with potential criticism and do not view the Anglo-American relationship in a vacuum, as many works on 'special relationships' tend to do. The contribution from Alison R. Holmes on *Transatlantic diplomacy and 'global' states* provides a very nuanced view of how the Anglo-American relationship's responses to globalisation and the shifting world order may provide a blueprint for the development of a new form of diplomacy whereby bilateral partnerships evolve a particular form of diplomacy in a multilateral world. Holmes' contribution offers a comprehensible and persuasive conception of how the relationship works in a global context and in which direction it may be developed from here.

This volume also provides excellent and thought-provoking contributions on the relevance and role of public opinion for the 'special relationship'. Robert M. Hendershot propounds that public opinion is highly representative of the state of Anglo-American relations and John Dumbrell explains the effect of public opinion on the relationship between Blair and Bush and the knock-on effects for a different form of interaction between Brown and Obama. He points out that the resonance of the sentimentality of the relationship with the public has a direct impact on the leaders of both countries, urging them to at least present the image of a 'special relationship'. He also rightly credits public opinion with institutionalising the cultural sinews and mythical sentiments of the relationship, creating a 'self-sustaining dynamic'. He could, however, have gone a little further in analysing how the different structures of government in each country are effected in diverse ways by public opinion which means that the role of the general public in policy-making differs in the US and the UK. Effectively this leaves the US with less room for manoeuvre and the UK leaders with slightly more autonomy-a reality which has a variety of outcomes for the idea of promoting a 'special relationship'.

Rather predictably, with the exception of one (Tony Jackson), all of the authors in this volume conclude that there does in fact exist a 'special relationship' between these two states. Indeed, this is an inevitable conclusion in light of the real and sustained cooperation in the areas of defence, intelligence and nuclear cooperation which are termed here the 'functional aspects' of the relationship. Furthermore, the 'cultural sinews' of the relationship are similarly given particular weight, as it has long been the case that for political – whether realist, functional or ideational-reasons, American and British leaders have long used the rhetoric of 'specialness' to appeal to statesmen and the general public alike.

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The more interesting conclusions of the book relate to the use of the relationship in changing the ways the two states behave and make decisions with regard to each other and broader foreign policy issues. Indeed the editors do point out that despite the asymmetric relationship that exists between the two in terms of traditional forms of hard power, there is an important strategic role played by British structural power, particularly within institutions like the United Nations and NATO. Where the arguments about the global role of the bilateral partnership are less convincing is in the consideration of the British and American role in the world.

'The remarkable transition from British to American hegemony owes in part to the American informal empire largely protecting the core values as well of interests of the UK'. (p.266) This sentence hints at what one would expect the book to address in a more direct manner; the world view of each state and what form of hegemony defines their foreign policies. However there is an inherent contradiction here as the hegemonic tendencies of a state do not usually lead to protecting the interests of another state nor does one state willingly mitigate its hegemonic propensities in recognition of another hegemonic power. To rephrase what perhaps does draw the two states together is their idea of the importance of playing a 'role in the world'. But it cannot be reasonably argued that British hegemony was automatically transformed into American supremacy, rather this is a generous analysis of British decline.

Frustratingly the book fails to address whether or not this hegemonic connection actually means that the Anglo-American relationship is special. One would expect to find reference to other 'special' relationships, as indicated in the introduction or at least some comparison to other forms of alliances or power-sharing between states in order to determine if the adjective 'special' can be used about this relationship. Instead, the reader is left with rather imprecise conclusions such as 'Washington has been able to look repeatedly since the Cold War to the UK as its most stalwart ally.' (p.267)

To be fair, the book does provide a nuanced analysis of the issue and does not shy away from the reality that personal relations between leaders, for example, does impact in different ways at different times on the Anglo-American partnership. True too is the conclusion of the editors that Britain realises that the American world view is also the one most likely to serve their interests and therefore it makes common sense to continue to strive for a strong relationship with the super power. Where the sceptics can raise more than an eyebrow is in the chapters which allege the formation of a 'shared transnational identity' and a 'supra-national relationship'. Indeed, while these are interesting theories in the effort to explain the resilience of a close relationship between these two countries, it would rather presume that each country gives equal weight to the relationship. While there is a detailed analysis of the fluctuation and tensions and certainly the disagreements across the issues and time at hand, the book does not resolve the central question of how a relationship can be defined as 'special' when it is generally agreed that one side considers it a means to an end, and the other, an end in itself. Here, we have mainly the views of those who have the latter perspective of a definitive and 'special' alliance.

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Alanna O'Malley has a PhD in Anglo-American relations at the United Nations during the Congo crisis from 1960-1964 from the European University Institute in Florence. She is a contributor to the United Nations History Project at Harvard University and recently won a competitive travel award from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs for research in Congo and South Africa with the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS).

[1] <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/nilegardiner/100215856/barack-obamas-top-ten-insults-against-britain-2013-edition/?fb>