

 **Article REVIEW**

Ken Young. “A Most Special Relationship: The Origins of Anglo-American Nuclear Strike Planning.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9.2 (Spring 2007): 5-31. doi:10.1162/jcws.2007.9.2.5. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1162/jcws.2007.9.2.5> .

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The “special” relationship between Britain and the United States has long held the curiosity of historians and the general public alike, not least because it has always been a conveniently malleable term to both describe and deride Anglo-American relations. Academic texts abound on the twentieth-century relationship between the U.S. and the U.K., focussing largely on whether relations between the two countries ever deserved the term “special” and what that has meant—if anything—in practice. Winston Churchill coined the term in 1946, with the aspiration that the close and trusting relations that had been essential to both sides through World War II should continue. While Churchill believed the relationship was possible because of Anglo-American shared values and responsibilities, the origins of the Anglo-American ties were essentially based around military cooperation. The close trust and sense of shared mission that marked the relationship was furthered through the transatlantic investment in unravelling the secrets of atomic energy. But a turning point came in 1945 when President Truman declared that it was America, and America alone, that held on “sacred trust” the awesome power of nuclear weapons.

By 2003, the special relationship seemed to have become the stuff of tabloid derision and popular caricature. It fell on a film character, ‘Prime Minister’ Hugh Grant, to express the sentiments of many Britons regarding their country’s relationship with the U.S. When asked about the “special relationship” the fictional PM boldly replies; “I fear that this has become a bad relationship. ... a friend who bullies us is no longer a friend. And since bullies only respond to strength, from now onward, I will be prepared to be much stronger. And the President should be prepared for that.” Audiences across Britain applauded.

Yet as the opening stages of the war in Iraq unfolded in the spring of that year, an initial sense of pride was evident as the British Army were seen “doing their bit” alongside the American military. Historians did not fail to comment that this was just one more example of military cooperation typical of an enduring special relationship, but (coincidentally, one assumes) a number of texts were also published around that time questioning the reality behind Britain’s “privileged” position with the U.S. during the Cold War.¹ The fundamental question remains:

¹See, for example, Nigel Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War: The Irony of Interdependence* (2002). Ashton not only concludes that true interdependence never existed because the disparity of power between the U.S. and the U.K. was so great, he also argues Britain’s pursuit of interdependence was, at times, inimical to Britain’s national interest.

Borne from simple necessity for alliance with a powerful country at a time of great British weakness, was the “special” relationship anything more than Britain choosing to go along with the way America chose to rule the post-1945 world?²

Professor Ken Young of King’s College London acknowledges that “... the special relationship is something that continues to be expressed in the politics of gesture, sentiment, and self-ascribed historic missions,” but he tacks away from a focus on major personalities and rhetorical proclamation in an effort to understand the mechanics of the Anglo-American relationship. As an expert in both local policy decision-making in the U.K. and the broader history of British defence policy, Young is unusually well-equipped to bring policy studies into the historical domain. His article is, indeed, less about the special relationship *per se* and more about British defence policy in the 1950s, specifically nuclear strike planning and the provision of British bombers with American nuclear weapons.³ The principal novelty of his work comes from a close examination of the archives on “project Encircle,” a largely secret series of discussions on coordinating Anglo-American nuclear aerial bombing against targets in the Soviet Union. Aside from speaking to Young’s additional expertise in air power and technology, picking this area of coordination as a case-study has the added dynamic of being a topic where the subject matter was so sensitive—many of even the earliest American archives on joint nuclear operations are still classified—and the stakes considered so high, that cooperation and the sharing of information and materiel surely *had* to be classed as “special.” Such mutual reliance was certainly counter to instinct, on both sides of the Atlantic. Regardless, if we are to consider a relationship “special” it is perhaps fitting to select an exceptional area to analyse, particularly one known traditionally to bring out the most nationalistic and protective of military and diplomatic attitudes.⁴

Key personalities – Presidents and Prime Ministers—are the most typical focus of texts on the special relationship.⁵ Indeed Young begins his investigation by pointing out that the scant

² For a more appropriate up-to-date account of the relationship than the film *Love Actually* see James Wither, “An Endangered Partnership: the Anglo-American Defence Relationship in the Early Twenty-first Century,” *European Security*, Vol 15, No 1: 47-65, (March 2006).

³ Young is of course not the first historian to examine the relationship in terms of nuclear sharing, see also, Ian Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship: Britain’s deterrent and America, 1957-1962*, (1994), Jan Melissen, *The Struggle for Nuclear Partnership: Britain, the United States and the Making of the Ambiguous Alliance, 1952-1959* (1993), and John Baylis, *Ambiguity and Deterrence: British Nuclear Policy 1945-1964*, (1995).

⁴ It is, for example, important to note the importance Britain afforded to the maintenance of the national character of the V-bomber force, and the determination on both the American and British sides that the SAC and Bomber Command forces would remain under national control.

⁵The focus on personalities and rhetoric has often been abetted by an emphasis on memoirs as sources. Texts such as Henry Brandon’s *Special Relationships: A Foreign Correspondent’s Memoirs from Roosevelt to Reagan* (London, 1988) consistently appear as sources for historical works on Anglo-American relations.

attention joint strike planning has previously gained from historians is only set against the context of Macmillan's efforts to restore diplomatic relations after the Suez crisis. In Young's version of the tale, the Macmillan chapter is in fact a *continuation* of a level of military cooperation that began much earlier, but was somewhat weak because of Britain's lack of capacity in the nuclear realm. To do this, he traces how British requests were handled prior to the RAF having any serious capacity to deliver nuclear bombs against Soviet targets, as against the point in 1957 where the V-force bombers were on line, quite literally, to deliver. Young can thus trace the evolution of defence policy from the early 1950s demonstrating that as Britain's capacity to launch strikes against Soviet strikes increased, so did the RAF's importance, influence and closeness to the American Supreme Air Command (SAC).

Young embraces an archaeological approach to his work, meticulously building his case from archival sources, almost exclusively those now publicly available at the (U.K.) National Archives in Kew, London. Eschewing florid Churchillian quotations, Young instead trawls through correspondence, memoranda and minutes of meetings, chronicling the RAF Bomber Command's attempts to win friends, influence their American counterparts (particularly on the Strategic Air Command (SAC)), and glean precious information on targeting and strategic planning. The only time Young resorts to anecdotal evidence as a source is as a sop to the line that the special relationship is best explained as the exercise of "soft power."

The "soft power" argument that America's coordination with Britain cannot be explained in terms of military capacity or clear-cut benefits, but is better understood as a less tangible, shared sense of "comradeship," influence, and understanding, appeals to the idea that the special relationship was a relationship between human beings as much as a set of policies. Nonetheless, while a relationship where even British pilots felt they were "treated like Americans" by characters such as Curtis Le May speaks to the sentiment of the Anglo-American relationship, it does not explain it. The "soft power" version of the special relationship clearly has its place, but not in the thrust of this particular article: The key argument Young seeks to prove is that once Britain had the "hard power" nuclear means to fight in significant ways by America's side, her role was taken more seriously at a planning level.

Young's emphasis is on the practical and logistical side of the relationship. His thinking is centred on the idea that, "[p]oliticians employ rhetoric, whereas diplomats are more at home with practicalities." RAF commanders – playing a role that required the greatest of diplomatic skill—are the key actors in his tale.⁶ Rhetoric and political leaders aside, Young attempts to answer how both sides actually negotiated the sharing of materiel, information and planning mechanisms. The fact that there was *any* sharing marks out Britain's relationship with America as special—if not entirely unique—but there is clearly more to the story than the evolution of the 1946 McMahon Act and its amendment.

⁶ George Mills, Harry Broadhurst, William Dickson, and Geoffrey Tuttle, play starring roles alongside American General Nathan Twining, whose papers (available in the Library of Congress), Young also uses.

At its most basic level Young's article takes the very existence of Anglo-American nuclear collaboration (permitted eventually by the amendment of the McMahon Act in 1954) as neglected evidence of a "special" relationship. But his article also investigates the qualitative aspects of that collaboration, and here his evidence seems to muddy his conclusion that hard power capacity did increase British influence. One of the most pressing problems for the British initially, on a military and political level, was whether British permission was required before the U.S. launched an attack on the Soviet Union from the SAC's bases on British soil. Young deftly shows that ambiguity on such critical points was perhaps the principal characteristic of Anglo-American relations, and while he also shows that efforts to clear up such important questions were made, he does not show, for this example at least, that clear answers were ever obtained.

Instead, the article illustrates that there was consistent reticence on the British side even to ask directly for clarification; far better for the United States to offer information without being prodded. British military negotiators were instructed from the outset, and into the 1960s, to let the U.S. take the lead in developing the concept of joint operations which, Young emphasises, "did not prove difficult." Rather than persuading the Americans to do what the British wanted them to do however, Young reveals that, "the British officers [found] themselves simply responding to the US overtures." This lack of assertiveness similarly seems to have run through the British rules of engagement regarding negotiations with their American counterparts. Minutes of meetings reveal lengthy verbatim regurgitation of SAC documents and then simple RAF approval. In the preparatory meetings for project "Encircle," there is a description of how Air Vice Marshal Ronnie Lees was frank in asking the RAF to tabulate how much operations would cost the United States because "US commanders were hoping it would be 'cheaper' to allow the RAF to drop American-made bombs than to do so themselves." While Lees was persuaded not to talk in such crude terms during the final talks, the implications of the tenor and tactics—never mind the motivations—behind these negotiations deserve attention.

The other major consistency in Anglo-American relations seems to have come from the disparity between a greater American willingness to share bombs rather than plans. Young illustrates that while the Americans were able to provide Britain with critical supplies of materiel, including nuclear—even thermonuclear—weapons for delivery by RAF aircraft, they were far more reluctant to supply any decision-making power or even mechanisms for automatic consultation. The oft-presumed correlation between military power and a seat in the war-room was far from formulaic. There is also a twist in Young's tale, for while American concessions to the RAF were initially granted to try and encourage Britain to restrain the development of its own independent nuclear deterrent, the policy ended up, Young claims, freeing resources for Britain's own advanced weapons program. In fact, American policy directly contributed to Britain's desire to have its own bomb independent of the US *and* cooperation with the stronger nuclear partner too.⁷

⁷ As Ernest Bevin, in his usual indomitable way, put it, "We've got to have this thing over here, whatever it costs...We've got to have a bloody Union Jack flying on top of it." Quoted in Brian Cathcart, *Test of Greatness: Britain's Struggle for the Atom Bomb*, (1994), 21. Britain's first thermonuclear weapon was developed in 1957.

Unintended consequences may have played one part in the relationship during the 1950s, but Young also focuses on the deliberate intentions and motivations of British military planners and the continued care the U.S. took over the immediate consequences. Young is able to show that Britain's policy was motivated by nothing less than the national interest, namely saving Britain from destruction by embracing a strategy of Anglo-American deterrence. He also acknowledges, however, that Britain was motivated by a desire for a "restraining influence on the world's pre-eminent military power." As Britain became more confident in her ability to defend her soil and her interests, that desire for influence and understanding grew exponentially. Even while gradually resigning herself to reliance on American materiel, Britain never reconciled herself fully with being shut out from American planning and decision-making.

But what about the American version of the story? As told from the American side the project Encircle negotiations, as well as the motivations and reservations more generally for cooperation with the U.K. as told from the American side, remains unclear. Historians continue to presume long enduring disinterest from Washington in building and maintaining U.S.-UK relations in any "special" way, but both the lack of available archival material and the lack of American historians working on the subject deny us the confidence of such a straightforward conclusion. The United States did acknowledge as early as 1946 that forward-basing in the British Isles was necessary for them to be able to strike the USSR effectively and efficiently. Once the bases were open for business they needed protection and with so much then invested, the U.S. did have a valued commitment to U.K. territory, even when technological advances mitigated the need for geographical convenience. It was also clear early on in the post World War II special relationship, however, that the need for secrecy would preclude frank discussions across the Atlantic: the "special" nature of the weapons involved, and the initial U.S. monopoly, seriously inhibited the Anglo-American relationship being as trusting as Britain wanted. Moreover, infamous spies aside, few Americans had the full range of information British commanders were seeking, never mind the motivation to divulge it.

All these negatives might easily predispose a conclusion that the Anglo-American relationship was profoundly inhibited from being "special" in the more specific domain of joint strike planning. Young's key conclusion however is that while "US-led 'coordination' proved to be a highly ambiguous concept... such was the [British] dependence on American technology and American trust that it proved but a small step from [coordination of nuclear strike forces] to joint targeting and thus to true operational integration." So the special relationship in terms of joint strike planning happened through simple momentum? In part, but the important emphasis here is Young's demonstration that while *operations* became integrated, because such integration worked to the apparent benefit of both sides, in practical (sometimes nuanced) ways, other qualitative elements were still absent. Any confluence of political and military objectives at a *planning* level remained elusive in the late 1950s, despite the fact that this is what Britain's bombing command now wanted most. This critical planning-operations disconnect deserves exploration, for it not only reflects on our understanding of policy development between the United States and Britain during the foundational-period of the 1950s, but also the perennial complexity of nuclear sharing amongst unequal powers.

By 1955 Britain considered itself to be in a dire position, despite the materiel gain the RAF had garnered from the United States. Young quotes Air Chief Marshal Sir William Dickson starkly conceding that Britain was no longer certain “the Americans would use their resources exactly as we had planned or would wish ...” and this despite Churchill being back at the helm and the considerable expansion of the V-bomber force. At its most straightforward level, if Britain could not prove her usefulness to the Americans, she was held at arm’s length regarding planning. But what Young shows is that this did not stop Bomber Command from persistently trying to get closer.

The light at the end of Young’s chronology of relative failure comes in 1957, when a secret meeting in Washington (project “Encircle”) finally drew up terms of reference for a Joint Planning Group and called for the definition of mechanisms of command and control. There were signs then that the Anglo-American relationship could be a relationship in the normal sense of the term; namely one that allowed each side to talk to and influence the other, even at a time of crisis. Young plays up the British treatment of Encircle as an incredible success for Britain (much as RAF officers did at the time), but he then continues from the end of the talks to show that while the U.S. may have agreed to these planning steps, they did not lead where Britain wanted. Despite now being equipped one American bomb to each British (specially adapted) bomber, the RAF still found itself in a subordinate role. There remained a chasm between agreement to coordinate and actual coordination in practice and, as Young details in the second half of his article, the thorniest question of all remained “whether Bomber Command’s forces were to *coordinate with ... or be coordinated by* their American colleagues.”

This was particularly important when it came to the strategy for the use of nuclear weapons against Soviet targets. One of the most intriguing points that Young makes is that Britain and America continued, through the 1950s, to disagree on whether British targeting was to be focussed on “city-busting” or, as per the American operational doctrine, taking out the Soviet Union’s military capacity. This was straightforward enough, but the consequences for Britain’s own defence policy-making were significant. The British side relied on rhetorical obfuscation in an effort to cover up transatlantic differences on strategy, making a tenuous, though now oft used, distinction between target “policy” and target “selection”. Theoretically, the British Ministry of Defence made the decisions on target policy and the Air Ministry the decisions on target selection, but Young claims that the reality of this ambiguity meant “that policy passed *upward* in the form of a distillation of target selections made by officers of the British and American air forces.” By 1958-59, 69 Soviet cities were assigned as the majority of the 106 targets allocated to the UK (dropping to 48 in 1962 and 14 in 1963) but despite this apparent confluence in strategy, the RAF “still did not actually know what the Americans planned to do.”

In summary, Young’s work relies overwhelmingly on U.K. sources, and far more of the British side of the story is told even though Young does use American documents and correspondence duplicated in the pertinent RAF files. Whether focussing on Britain is an appropriate or inevitable way of exploring the special relationship, it does still leave some elements to be investigated further. Regardless, Young’s practical and nuanced exploration of project Encircle

shows the way joint operations developed between the two countries and that development was an important chapter in the history of Anglo-American collaboration.

Professor Young's investigation amounts to an excursion into archives more than an argument but I appreciated his effort to take a historical approach to policy studies whilst avoiding trying to fit his case-study into any distracting or contrived hypothesis or theory. Some sections of the article do however suffer from the need to compress material that will later be published in book form, particularly in terms of technical explanations and too little mention of the larger historical context, both of which might have helped non-experts gain more from the article. Nonetheless, Young's principal mission is an in-depth analysis of project Encircle and this mission is executed with the great care of an expert and through a narrative dictated by evidence.

By way of one final note, it remains surprising that so few historians don't frame consideration of the Anglo-American relationship in comparative terms, explicitly, "special compared to what?" While clearly outside the remit of Young's article, Britain is certainly not the only country with which the U.S. has proclaimed to have close relations. But perhaps the difficulty in finding a good comparison is determining what shows that Anglo-American relations in the 1950s were truly "special".

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