



Andrew Mumford. *Counterinsurgency Wars and the Anglo-American Alliance: The Special Relationship on the Rocks.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017. 248 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-62616-492-5.

Reviewed by David Haglund (Queen's University)

Published on H-Diplo (June, 2018)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Andrew Mumford has produced a fascinating interpretation of how the “Anglo-American Special Relationship” (AASR) has been affected by the varying experiences of the United Kingdom and the United States in the area of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare, from the early post-Second World War years down to the present. His is a well-documented and well-written study (using both primary and secondary sources) that, ultimately, concludes there is much less to the AASR than meets the eye and the principal reason for this is to be revealed in a careful investigation of COIN operations in which the two countries have been involved, both separately and together. Among his eight case studies, five have featured the British as the main protagonists in military operations, one focuses on the Americans, and two have seen both countries side by side combatting insurgents. The five British operations were in Palestine, Malaya, Cyprus, South Arabia/Yemen, and Ulster. The one US-dominated operation was in Vietnam. And the two shared enterprises, which were in Iraq and Afghanistan, saw the US heft the laboring oar. Mumford’s main conclusion is that these eight COIN episodes have placed inordinate strain on the Anglo-American relationship, to such an extent that it leaves one wondering why anyone would consider there to be anything at all “special” about their interactions.

So what does he tell us about these eight cases, and in particular, why have they imposed such a staggering burden on the bilateral relationship? He tells us three things, each of them problematic for the health of the AASR. The first claim is that Britain’s numerous “small wars” made Americans complicit in helping sustain a project, imperialism, to which they had officially been opposed ideologically. This embarrassed the US position globally, but with Cold War exigencies uppermost in mind, it was felt that Washington risked losing influence to Moscow (or Beijing) if it did not accommodate British imperial practices. The second claim is that America’s domestic politics had an uncanny way of intruding upon strategic considerations in both

countries, with the result being to frustrate and, at times, deeply alienate the British ally. The third claim is that the two countries’ behavior in these COIN campaigns came with a high normative price tag: it constituted a lasting stain on the claim that the AASR has been an unequivocal “force for good in the world” (p. 3). Each of the case studies reveals something to be wrong with the AASR, albeit for reasons that vary according to the specific context of the cases (for example, Palestine and Ulster both testify to the ability of ethnic diasporas to complicate US foreign policy in general, and the AASR in particular). But whatever the “specifics” of the cases, collectively the experience of COIN has been a corrosive one for the AASR.

Is his pessimism justified? How one assesses Mumford’s conclusion is dependent on two considerations. One concerns the logical implication of the cases that Mumford has chosen to sustain the inference that the AASR resembles nothing so much as it does the Oakland of Gertrude Stein’s imagination, about which she so famously quipped that “there is no there, there.” The other is the meaning of “special” when applied to any bilateral interstate relationship in general (as well, of course, to the AASR in particular). I address both considerations in this brief review.

There have been numerous analyses of the AASR, some even predating that historic moment in March 1946 when Winston Churchill praised to the rafters and gave this bilateral relationship its name, during a speech in Fulton, Missouri. In his speech, the former prime minister warned ominously about the descent of an “iron curtain” separating western from eastern Europe, and summoned forth the special relationship in response to the danger.^[1] Europe may have ceased to be as divided as it was in Churchill’s day, but the same cannot be said of the scholars who study the AASR; they seem as fractious as ever, constantly debating with each other on two matters in particular. The first point of scholarly contention concerns whether the AASR continues to exist in any

meaningful sense (some wonder if it *ever* existed). The second point concerns the basis of whatever it might be that binds the two states together (assuming, that is, there to be meaning in the AASR).

With apologies to Stein, the least that can be remarked about the AASR is that there does seem to be some “there, there.” To assert this is hardly to deny the obvious, namely, that there exists a stout band of AASR deniers, who insist, in the words of one of their number, that if anything can be deemed special about the Anglo-American relationship, it is its dysfunctionality—a relationship “only ‘special’ insofar as it has been *more* contentious than any other in the recent past. As a result, the political ‘special relationship’ is but a futile exercise in deluded nostalgia. It leans on the altar of a past that never was, though it yields but the flimsiest results in the present, and is a useless tool to shape the future.”[2] Even blunter is the assessment of another AASR denier, Edward Ingram, who tells us that what some choose to call the special relationship is nothing other than a sinister device by which a predatory America managed to ensnare a hapless Britain into its orbit of satellites, blinding gullible British decision makers to reality, such that “although the United States did not formally declare war against Britain during World War II, it did destroy Britain and may have done so deliberately.”[3]

In *Counterinsurgency Wars and the Anglo-American Alliance*, Mumford confirms the existence of the AASR, though he argues that it no longer matters. Moreover, he claims it attained its importance more through illusion than because of any correspondence with “objective” reality. Indeed, he tells us that “as a phrase and as an idea, the US-UK special relationship is a mythological Churchillian construct” (p. 199). It is a very fragile conceptual entity whose current debility can be traced back to the very problem Mumford investigates in this book: the problem of COIN wars. Those wars, he declares, have done more than any other single thing to render the AASR such a weak reed, and virtually to put it on life support.

There are many other scholars who insist that the AASR is a robust geopolitical institution; it is just that they cannot agree among themselves as to what it is that makes the relationship different enough from other bilateral relationships as to warrant the label “special.” Some see common interests, especially in the area of defense and security (namely, nuclear and intelligence sharing), but also in the economic sphere, as constituting the AASR’s bonding mechanisms. This we might label the “realist” perspective on the AASR.[4] Other scholars, more inclined to constructivism than to realism, believe that what holds the AASR together and makes it so special is either a shared (transatlantic) “collective identity” or a shared cultural heritage, or both. Among this latter group one finds the late Christopher Hitchens, lauded by Mumford for his willingness to challenge the view that the AASR must be a “force for good” in the field of International Relations. While it is possible that both Mumford and Hitchens are on the same page when it comes to their normative assessment of the AASR, they would seem to differ greatly on its vitality and durability, judging from at least one page in their respective books: the title page. More precisely, I refer to their divergent subtitles, with Hitchens’s *Blood, Class, and Empire: The Enduring Anglo-American Relationship* (2004) conveying the expectation that the AASR remains strong, while

Mumford advertises his thesis as a relationship that is clearly “on the rocks.”

Despite his praise for Hitchens, Mumford does not agree with him about the AASR’s durability. To understand the basis of his pessimism, we need to grapple with his definition of “special.” To his credit, Mumford does undertake to supply a working definition of “specialness” as a quality in bilateral relations, one that he borrows from Patrick Porter, whom he quotes to the effect that for Anglo-American relations to be deemed truly special, they must “not only entail beneficial transatlantic relations but also must pass a higher test of ‘exceptional influence’” (p. 2). It is clear to Mumford that the AASR fails on both counts, especially the second one, because the alliance between the two countries is so “thoroughly asymmetrical” (p. 2).

Suffice it to note that there are other ways of construing “special,” not requiring that the normative category of “beneficial” attributes be among the ingredients of this kind of a relationship, or the assumption that asymmetry renders specialness, *ipso facto*, impossible. One common dictionary definition of “specialness” is simply a quality that, empirically, sets one relationship apart from other reasonably comparable relationships. If we applied this definition, then we could search for what it is that is so different about the empirical reality of Anglo-American relations, as opposed, say, to German-American relations, or French-American relations, or any other country that is said to have a special relationship with the US.[5]

Insofar as concerns Mumford’s case studies, I am reminded of what Samuel Johnson was said to have said about dogs walking on their hind legs—that the wonder of it was not that they did it so well but that they could do it at all. A good theory requires being able to survive attempts to “falsify” it, and case studies should put theory to stringent tests, requiring from those who employ the case-study method (as does Mumford) to use “hard” cases rather than “easy” ones. Mumford, although clearly conversant with IR theory, prefers to es-

chew explicit theorizing in his book, but if one wanted to cast his story in terms of explanatory theorists’ familiar *modus operandi* of trying to link causes (“independent variables”) with effects (“dependent variables”), then his argument could be stated like this: the cause of the current dilemma (he sees) facing the AASR is to be found in the two states’ inability to have overcome profound tensions stemming from their unfortunate experiences with COIN. COIN, in a word, has had a way of unfailingly putting the AASR to a test that it could not pass.

Is this really so? No one would deny that COIN has presented numerous challenges to the US and the UK, whether working either alone or together, and one of the many strengths of Mumford’s book is to demolish the British conceit that they somehow “do” COIN better than the hapless Americans; both countries, he tells us, do it poorly, with the British most recently distinguishing themselves by ineptitude in Iraq (Basra) and Afghanistan (Helmand Province). But is the two countries’ poor track record in COIN, which Mumford’s book so trenchantly exposes, any reason to imagine that the AASR is in peril? Since I have already brought up Churchill earlier in this review, let me close it by referring to a comment he allegedly uttered about allies—that the only thing worse than fighting with them is fighting without them. The important point about COIN campaigns, it could be argued, is that they represent wars of choice rather than wars of necessity. A far better test for the AASR would be wars of necessity, which are fortunately few in number. And if we accept that there has only really been one of these for both Britain and America in modern times, the Second World War, then a different conclusion might be in order from the one Mumford presents—not of a relationship on the rocks but of one that “rocks” when truly facing adversity.

Notes

[1]. Alan A. Dobson and Steve Marsh, eds., *Churchill and the Anglo-American Special Relationship* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[2]. Erwan Lagadec, *Transatlantic Relations in the 21st Century: Europe, America and the Rise of the Rest* (London: Routledge, 2012), 80. Sharing this author's scorn for the AASR is Guy Arnold, *America and Britain: Was There Ever a Special Relationship?* (London: Hurst, 2014).

[3]. Edward Ingram, "The Wonderland of the Political Scientist," *International Security* 22 (Summer 1997): 53-63, quotation on 56-57.

[4]. Examples include John Baylis, "The Anglo-American Relationship and Alliance Theory," *International Relations* 8 (January 1985): 368-379; Richard J. Aldrich, "British Intelligence and the Anglo-American 'Special Relationship' during the Cold War," *Review of International Studies* 24 (July 1998): 331-351; and James E. Cronin, "Convergence by Conviction: Politics and Economics in the Emergence of the 'Anglo-American Model'," *Journal of Social History* 33 (Summer 2000): 781-804.

[5]. As is done by the various contributors, myself included, in John Dumbrell and Axel R. Schäfer, eds., *America's 'Special Relationships': Foreign and Domestic Aspects of the Politics of Alliance* (London: Routledge, 2009).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: David Haglund. Review of Mumford, Andrew. *Counterinsurgency Wars and the Anglo-American Alliance: The Special Relationship on the Rocks*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=52317>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.