

## UK FOREIGN POLICY & THE 'SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP':

The British "special relationship" with the USA began back in 1941, when Churchill was forced to appeal to President Roosevelt for help in the fight against Hitler. Before then the two great powers had been engaged in a fierce rivalry that some pundits – even including Leon Trotsky in his Mexican exile - thought might one day lead to war. Since then, it's been the cornerstone of British foreign policy, never seriously challenged by any British government, Labour or Conservative. These days criticisms of US policy are airily dismissed by politicians such as Blair as "fashionable anti-Americanism". After only sixty odd years the special relationship has become part of the air we breathe.

This mindset lies behind many of the issues that people in the peace and justice movement are concerned about: the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the continued existence of US bases in the UK, the likelihood that the Blair government has already decided to buy a replacement nuclear "defence" system from the USA, and the possibility that the UK could be dragged into attacks on Iran or Syria. The need to show a peculiar concern for US interests even undermines the government's positions on climate change and world trade.



*Churchill's homburg hides his begging bowl*

It's never remotely been a relationship between equals. Churchill went to Roosevelt with a begging bowl. Lend Lease, whereby the USA sent war supplies to a beleaguered Britain (once Britain had spent all its dollars), was considered by the Americans as an act of charity towards a poor relation. The USA subsequently emerged from the Second World War as the world dominant power, whereas Britain came through with its economy in tatters, its days of imperial grandeur clearly numbered. The phrase "junior partner" concocted by Foreign Office mandarins at that time obviously includes a strong element of wishful thinking. President Kennedy was closer when he said that Britain was "America's lieutenant - the fashionable word is partner".

In the first phase of the special relationship Churchill had to draw the USA into fighting fascism in Europe rather than just in the Pacific. The alliance had one clear aim: the military defeat of Germany, Italy and Japan.

In the second - murkier - phase British planners considered it important to persuade Washington (which probably didn't need much persuading) not to retreat into its pre-war isolationism but to remain in western Europe, supposedly to guarantee its security against invasion by the Red Army. This phase of the special relationship is said to have come to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

But commentators such as Noam Chomsky and Mark Curtis point out that the Cold War can be described more accurately as a war against independent development. The USA, aided and abetted by Britain, aimed to control the world economy. So it didn't accept the right of other countries to exploit their natural resources in the interests of their own people rather than in the interests of US businessmen and investors. By definition this was "communism", and it meant the Russians were coming. Of course, this policy was easier to enforce against weak opponents.

The pattern was established early on: in 1954 the democratically elected government of Guatemala, which had nationalised some of the idle acres of the United Fruit Company in order to distribute them to landless *campesinos*, was overthrown in a CIA coup. Britain, which had executed a similar operation against Guiana the previous year, then played a key role to prevent UN action against this. The US attack on Vietnam falls into the same category, as do many other "interventions" - all with terrible consequences.

Through the Cold War years the special relationship became institutionalised at many different levels. At British government level it encompassed military and intelligence co-operation, provision of bases in the UK and abroad, and, of course, unflinching diplomatic support at the United Nations. The USA could also rely on British backing in the organs of economic control such as the World Bank and the IMF.

Within academia most British intellectuals, like their American counterparts, accepted the official version of the Cold War without a murmur. Crucially important, the same thing applied to the British media – with rare exceptions. The interpenetration of the two economies increased after Thatcher lifted exchange controls in the early 80s. And US social and cultural influences affect Britain much more than other countries in Europe. The upshot is that Britain is colonised by its former colony to an extent that few of its inhabitants realise.

As in any relationship there have been a few tiffs and some blazing rows:

- The Suez crisis in 1956, when Eisenhower pulled the rug from under the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt, was a major humiliation for the Eden government. But Eden's successor, Macmillan, took it as a signal to draw even closer to Washington.
- In the early 70s Nixon is said to have reacted like a jilted lover when Ted Heath back-pedalled on the special relationship so as to get the French to lift their veto on British entry into the Common Market. So far as we know, co-operation at other levels continued smoothly.