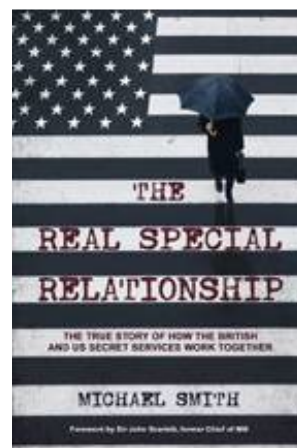


Michael Smith

The Real Special Relationship

Foreward

By Sir John Scarlett



On 8 February 2016, I had the privilege, as chairman of the Bletchley Park Trust, to attend a ceremony in the office of Commander Alastair Denniston, the wartime head of Bletchley Park, to mark the 75th anniversary of the effective beginning of the 'Special Relationship' alongside the then GCHQ director Robert Hannigan and his NSA counterpart Admiral Mike Rogers.

Seventy-five years previously, just before midnight, 8 February 1941, Denniston had received two US Army officers, Captain Abe Sinkov and Lieutenant Leo Rosen, and two US Navy counterparts, Lieutenant Robert Weeks and Ensign Prescott Currier, in the same office. They had brought with them the top secret analogue device 'Purple Machine' they were using to decipher sensitive Japanese communications, such as ambassadorial communications to Tokyo. This success was arguably the US's biggest secret.

Over the following month, the US officers were given a complete briefing on activities at Bletchley Park, including full details of British success at breaking the German Enigma cipher. Without doubt, this was Britain's biggest secret. The two countries were exchanging their biggest secrets. This denoted an extraordinary level of trust. As noted to the BBC in 2016, there was at that time no treaty between them. There was no formal commitment to each other. The United States would not join the war for another ten months. The exchange was simply unprecedented.

A particular feature of the occasion was provided by nineteen-year-old Barbara Abernethy, assistant to Commander Denniston. She handed out sherry from the Army and Navy Stores. It was her first encounter with Americans. There was a romantic aftermath. Barbara was to marry one of the American officers subsequently posted to Bletchley Park. Their marriage lasted until his death in 2003. Barbara died in the US in 2012.

This is a romantic story in many respects. But it is fair to say that the meeting was the beginning of the unique 'Special Relationship', which continues to this day. It is appropriate for the story to begin at Bletchley Park. The relationship has from the beginning been rooted in broad-ranging, cutting-edge intelligence work, an aspect which has been better understood since the Five Eyes partnership has become publicly acknowledged and discussed in recent years.

As Michael Smith demonstrates, it goes much wider than that. There is a widespread view that the relationship is more appreciated and talked up by the British as a means of promoting their global role, which has visibly declined since 1941. In my experience, the relationship is highly valued by all participants in the Five Eyes, not just the US and UK, but also Canada, Australia and New Zealand, who, as 'British Dominions', were brought into the BRUSA (UKUSA since 1953) intelligence collaboration agreement in March 1946.

The relationship is still going strong after more than eighty years. It is based on an exceptional degree of trust between five independent nation states. As noted in the prologue, this may have been best described by Prescott Currier, one of the four American visitors, commenting in the late 1960s. The Special Relationship 'is still on a personal friendly basis, without any regard to what the politics of the moment may be. It doesn't seem to make any difference at all. We've never faltered and we've never lost out and we've never become very disenchanted with one another. It's something which will probably continue indefinitely.' That was said over fifty years ago. It is still true. The commitment, trust and personal emotion still apply.

Smith describes the very beginning and early years of the relationship in detail. His account is well informed, balanced and well judged. He puts the story into its historical and political context. For me, at least, some key aspects stand out.

A long-lasting and structural achievement on this scale can only take place on the basis of exceptional political leadership. This was certainly provided in the 1940s by Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Notwithstanding the friendship and the emotion described above, there were many differences and misunderstandings between the British and American individuals involved.

The story reminds us how little we knew each other before the age of global travel and 24-hour communications. After 1941, Americans came in large numbers to wartime Britain. Everyone had to adapt quickly. We did not know each other well. Jean Howard from Bletchley Park summed it up forcefully. 'They were different animals and the English they spoke had different meanings. They were fat, we were emaciated. They were smart (eleven different sorts of uniform). We were almost in rags. They were rich, we were poor . . . We were overworked and exhausted and having to teach people who barely knew where Europe was, was the last straw.'

The Americans saw the British as overcautious and overprotective of their strengths and assets, including their intelligence achievements and experience. For them, the British were truly defensive. For their part, the British worried about US assertiveness, including taking unnecessary risks with their operational planning and seemingly endless resources. The Americans seemed careless, including on occasions with their secrets, which had a habit of leaking into the frontline US media.

The British security and intelligence services had been in place since before the First World War and by the early 1940s were well structured and essentially confident. There were rivalries, but they were used to working with each other. The US services were still underdeveloped. Until the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was formed during the war, they did not have a separate human intelligence agency. Indeed, OSS did not survive the end of the war and the CIA was not formed until September 1947. Until the formation of the National Security Agency (NSA) in 1952, communications intercept was conducted within the navy and army.

There was intense rivalry and manoeuvring throughout the US system not just during the war, but, as Smith demonstrates, up to and including Korea. The British were keen to encourage the development of the OSS and subsequently the CIA. Indeed, these US agencies were often seen within the US system as British nominees and lackeys. At the same time, the British were only too aware of the growing disparity in resources and the risk of being outmatched on the global scale in the post-war world. This book captures well the speed with which independent US activity took off across Europe in the aftermath of D-Day and liberation.

Throughout the story told we find some notable and well-known spies, mainly but not exclusively on the British side (Philby, Burgess, Maclean, Fuchs, Weisband, Cairncross, Blake, Ames). Their stories are well described. They are not exaggerated.

The Special Relationship was founded in the exceptional circumstances of the Second World War. After May 1945, it was tested and developed in the confrontation with the Soviet Union, most notably in the complex and collaborative intelligence work against Operation Borodino, the Soviet programme to develop atomic weaponry, the conflicts and tensions in the Balkans (notably the joint operations in Albania) and then Korea.

The Korean War was a major test in east Asia where the US had a dominant role but depended significantly on the resources offered by Hong Kong. Smith highlights the achievements but also the tensions and misjudgements of this war. There were intelligence failures, most notably over the large-scale Chinese military intervention in late 1950, but as the book makes clear, there was also impressive intelligence reporting on the Chinese build-up before the intervention. The key misjudgements were at the top political and military level. The policy makers found it difficult to understand and anticipate Chinese strategic thinking and objectives. This leaves us something to think about today.

Smith describes the intense collaboration in the Cold War, including the developing (and dangerous) air reconnaissance of eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, operations in East Germany and Vienna and, of course, the Berlin Tunnel. The overthrow of Mossadeq in Iran in 1953 is of particular interest in the context of the Special Relationship. US awareness of the capabilities and assets of the United Kingdom comes through clearly. But the US was determined, including at the top level, to assert US interests, objectives and leadership.

The year 1956 was exceptional and testing with the Hungary and Suez crises reaching a climax at the very same time in the autumn. The year was certainly testing for the Special Relationship. The US and UK were in basic disagreement over the British-French-Israeli intervention to overthrow Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt. The CIA and the NSA were well aware of British (and French and Israeli) plans. Smith shows, however, how they continued to share their intelligence with the British.

President Eisenhower had long personal experience of the Special Relationship and UKUSA intelligence sharing. In late November 1956, in a personal message to Lord Ismay, NATO secretary-general, he noted: 'I have never lost sight of the importance of Anglo-American friendship and the absolute necessity of keeping it strong and healthy in the face of the continuing Soviet threat.' He then told Newsweek that 'Our friendship with the people of Great Britain and Western Europe must be maintained and must be strengthened.' In March 1957, and at Eisenhower's suggestion, a successful conference took place in Bermuda 'to restore confidence in the Anglo-American relationship'. Suez had been a test. The Special Relationship survived wholly intact. But British global influence and prestige was significantly reduced.

Eisenhower's commitment carried through to John F. Kennedy, whom, as Smith shows, he briefed carefully on the intelligence relationship during the transition period before Kennedy took office in January 1961. This briefing justified itself to an exceptional degree at the international high point of the Kennedy presidency, the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. Smith explains in detail the key role in the crisis played by intelligence from GRU colonel Oleg Penkovsky on Soviet missile development and capability. The intelligence not only helped the US to identify the significance of the missiles as they were installed, but critically, also allowed Kennedy to judge 'how much time he might have to negotiate before taking action to destroy the missiles'. Penkovsky was an MI6 agent, run in close coordination with the CIA.

In a broader sense, Smith's account demonstrates the close and mutually supportive personal relationship enjoyed by President Kennedy and Prime Minister Macmillan. Indeed, he describes this as one of the undoubted high points of the Special Relationship, a high point which came to an end with Macmillan's resignation on 18 October 1963 and Kennedy's assassination just over one month later. But at least one achievement of their close

collaboration was the continuation of 'the independent British nuclear deterrent and the close nuclear relationship between Britain and America, which has remained in place until the current day'. Smith demonstrates how this was not an easy achievement in terms of the US-UK relationship. Interestingly, in the early 1960s, the US was taking increasing account of continental European positions, especially French (de Gaulle) resentment over the Special Relationship and the risk as they saw it that US support for the UK deterrent would become a key factor in the blocking of UK membership of the EEC (a membership which the US strongly supported).

Smith also reveals interesting (and for some, perhaps, surprising) details on British influence on US policy in the early years of US involvement in Vietnam. This influence was based on British success in countering the Malayan insurgency in the 1950s, in particular through the development of strategic hamlets across sensitive rural areas of the country. The British example suggested this was the route to follow in combating the Việt Cộng, not a more conventional military approach. Some senior British advisers sought to oppose the military overthrow of President Ngô Đình Diệm on 1 November 1963. Their advice was not followed. President Diệm was killed in the coup. The US had advance knowledge of the operation, even if they were not actively involved. President Kennedy was visibly shocked by the president's death. Just over three weeks later, he was dead himself.

Kennedy's assassination was followed in October 1964 by the arrival of a new British Labour prime minister, Harold Wilson. The increasingly complex conflict in Vietnam led to significant early tension between Prime Minister Wilson and President Johnson. Famously, Wilson resisted intense pressure from Johnson to commit British troops to the campaign. But underlying support for US objectives continued through military means, in particular the deployment of Royal Navy submarines, signals intelligence operations and RAF support in Europe, to ease the pressure on USAF.

An especially interesting and significant aspect of the support is explained by Smith's account of the work of successive British consuls general in Hanoi as the conflict developed from 1964 onwards. Most of these consuls general, who followed each other in quick succession, were career MI6 officers, including Brian Stewart and Daphne Park, both of whom went on to senior positions in the service. Classic secret agent running was very difficult in the wartime circumstances of Hanoi. But these British intelligence officers were on the ground, well trained and well motivated to report on the impact of US military operations, most especially bombing raids on targets in Hanoi. Slightly to their surprise their reports landed regularly on the president's desk. Their work will certainly have contributed to the much-improved relationship between Wilson and Johnson, even though the prime minister kept Britain out of direct involvement in the conflict.

At this point, the story begins to move into the current era. From 1966 the Special Relationship was required to adapt to the changing balance of power, most especially the continuing decline in Britain's global role, influence and capabilities. In reality, this process of global retreat was more complicated than might at first appear. In any event, the Special Relationship continued to function with deep effect, most notably in intelligence, but also in political cooperation.

On the intelligence side, Smith highlights success in the tracking of Soviet submarines in the Atlantic, monitoring of Soviet warships, including (intriguingly) through the deployment of British trawler skippers, and the capturing of the latest radar technology in a sophisticated short notice operation in Berlin. Notably, in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the key intelligence role was played by the British military intercept site at Ayios Nikolaos near Famagusta in Cyprus. Intelligence coverage monitored the build-up to war, highlighting Israel's critical advantage in air combat capability. This allowed the JIC to give a remarkably accurate prediction that the war

would be short, 'a week plus'. (The head of Mossad made a very similar prediction to President Johnson.) Special Relationship collaboration was not confined to intelligence-gathering, as confirmed by the British proposal for a joint US-UK naval task force to guarantee freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba. This proposal drew especially warm praise for Harold Wilson from President Johnson.

In 1968, attention moved from the Middle East to Europe with the Soviet and Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia on 20 August. As tension mounted following the start of Dubcek's reforms, the movements and activities of Soviet and other Warsaw Pact forces were followed in the closest detail by shared US and UK military signals intelligence. This formed the basis for continual policy dialogue characterised in the early part of the year at least by a shared US-UK instinct to question whether Moscow would take the risk to its international reputation by military intervention. This political judgement, that Moscow would build up pressure but refrain from the final act, persisted in London at least within the JIC, to the last moment.

By mid-July, assessment in Washington had hardened that 'the chances of a violent Soviet intervention had sharply increased'. Subsequent reflection in the UK following the invasion focused on the risk of 'mirror imaging' and 'persevering' with an established view, recognised risks for intelligence assessment. Significantly, the limitations of reliance on signals intercepts began to be acknowledged. Perhaps the only way of knowing in advance of the decision to invade was to have an agent in or near the Politburo. This would become increasingly relevant as the Cold War dragged on.

As Smith points out, the early 1970s marked a low point in the Special Relationship, the consequence of a combination of politics and personalities on both sides of the Atlantic. The UK was under serious economic pressure. The top priority for Prime Minister Edward Heath was to secure membership of the European Economic Community (EEC). From a personal point of view, Heath also seemed less inclined to focus on the US. In Washington, Henry Kissinger was dominant in formulating foreign policy and quick to take offence if US interests were not met.

The resulting tensions and occasional formal interruptions in intelligence exchange prompted concern about the long-term implications for the relationship. But it soon became apparent that the relationship had become exceptionally deep and meaningful, at the levels both of intelligence exchange and of personal commitment. A series of personal comments from those involved at the time demonstrate the point. 'The relationship between the NSA and its British counterparts was founded on far more than just an exchange of intelligence. It was a joint intelligence production programme.' Also, as noted by an internal NSA history, 'collaboration remained almost total'. Each side brought additional access and assessment capability to their relationship. For example, the 1970s was a time of rapid technological change and a big increase, especially on the US side, in computer capacity. This was a major benefit for the UK.

On the global scene, 1973 saw the build-up to the Yom Kippur War in October that year, a major intelligence challenge not met with total success. British signals intelligence facilities in Cyprus were a major source of UK-US insight as Egyptian and wider Arab attack planning developed. As of May-June, the JIC seemed to understand that Sadat was prepared to launch an attack even against the virtual certainty this would lead to defeat. But during the summer it became increasingly hard for Washington and London to believe that Egypt would take such a risk. Up to the last moment, and in spite of continuous reporting from the NSA and GCHQ, US and UK assessments did not predict the outbreak of war. In retrospect, this came to be seen as another example of 'perseveration'.

By the end of the 1970s, we are moving towards the end of the Cold War and the global tensions, at least some of which took place in this context. Smith's account of the differing British and US approach to countering the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 is of particular interest, given the relevance to recent and current events (a good example of the importance of understanding history). His account of the Falkland Islands, an episode not directly connected to the Cold War, is deeply illuminating regarding the complexity, depth and sheer importance of the Special Relationship. Britain was a direct participant in the conflict. At the political level, at least in the early stages, the US was potentially neutral and possibly a mediator. There was some conflict within the Reagan administration about who to support. In practice, and as the conflict developed, the role of intelligence collaboration became central to the outcome.

Smith gives a lot of detail concerning the effective US role in the recapture of the islands, including the final surrender of Port Stanley. He also brings out the emotional commitment of the US policy and intelligence leadership to the British alliance. He draws particular attention to the comments of Bobby Ray Inman, CIA deputy director and a former director of the NSA. Inman knew the value of the relationship better than anyone else in the White House Situation Room and explained bluntly but eloquently, in one of the most memorable quotes in the book, why it was far more important to America's strategic interests to support Britain rather than Argentina.

To return to the Cold War, we are reminded that no one on the US or British side expected 'the swift end to communist rule which followed Gorbachev's attempts to reform the system'. Among the multiple consequences of the collapse came major defections from the Soviet side, notably to MI6, including Vladimir Pasechnik, the microbiologist, and, famously, Vasili Mitrokhin, who brought over an extraordinary archive of Soviet operational activity in the West. All of this was shared with the US.

A persistent theme throughout this story is that, whatever the ups and downs in the US-UK political relationship at different times, the foundation and underlying strength of the Special Relationship has continued to lie in the unique and exceptionally close security and intelligence collaboration between them. This collaboration has, of course, been at its most developed in the work of the NSA and GCHQ. But as we approach the final stages of the Cold War, we see the key role played by the sharing of human source intelligence between MI6 and the CIA. Smith discusses in detail the work of Oleg Gordievsky, the MI6 agent within the KGB, and Ryszard Kuklinski, the CIA agent within the Polish Army and Warsaw Pact Command. Intelligence from these two agents played an especially important role in helping to avoid military, even nuclear, confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact in the early 1980s.

In recent years, the Soviet leadership's misunderstanding of US intentions, in particular during the NATO exercise Able Archer in November 1983, has been the subject of extensive analysis and debate. At the time, and as Smith points out, well-qualified experts, especially in the US, found it difficult to accept that the Soviet leadership believed the US was ready to launch a nuclear first strike against the USSR. Gordievsky's insight into their thinking is a powerful demonstration of the value of intelligence. It is important to note that, as of 2022, the risks of misunderstanding have not gone away.

The final two chapters cover the last twenty years of an eighty-year story (so far). They describe a period of exceptional turbulence and rising uncertainty in global affairs. We begin, of course, with 9/11, the overthrow of the Taliban and the occupation of Afghanistan. We then encounter the invasion of Iraq, ongoing counter-terrorist operations and terrorist attacks, including 7/7 in London 2005, Gaddafi's renunciation of nuclear weapons capability and, seven years later, the British-French-US operation to overthrow him. Now, in early 2022, we have continued tension with China and, as the most immediate threat, a major confrontation with Russia over Ukraine

and NATO expansion. It is fitting to note that a particular feature of the run-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been the public demonstration of NATO intelligence cooperation and capability, most notably that between the US and the UK, who have been speaking throughout with one voice. The world of intelligence has been constantly changing and adapting to the technology revolution. Increasingly, the special intelligence relationship has public visibility. It also continues to play a central role in decision-making and the development of events on the ground.

These are very demanding issues. Smith has researched them carefully and, where appropriate, goes into the detail. This helps him to illustrate the sheer depth of collaboration between the US and the UK in terms of the political relationship and policy formulation and the extent to which this almost certainly rests upon the intensity of the intelligence relationship, with an increasing focus on the role of other members of the Five Eyes, most recently and notably the announcement of AUKUS. But, as Smith demonstrates, collaboration has rarely been free of tension, most especially given different US and UK approaches to judicial issues and their human rights consequences in the field of counter-terrorism.

A key final comment for this foreword. Throughout the story, going back to the Second World War, we see the relative decline of Britain's global role and capability and the ever more obvious contrast in the resources available to the United States. As anyone who has worked in this area knows, those resources are vast. But whatever media coverage might imply, the Special Relationship is alive and well. Readers will have their own assessment as to why this might be. Undoubtedly, key factors are: shared interests and values; shared capabilities; a very long history of intimate collaboration at the personal as well as the national level; and, most crucially, mutual trust. Trust is the word.