

Heritage Lectures

No. 1116

Delivered March 17, 2009



Published by The Heritage Foundation

March 31, 2009

The Past, Present, and Possible Futures of the Anglo–American Alliance

Ted R. Bromund, Ph.D.

If this panel had been planned a month ago, I might have insisted on a different title. Before Prime Minister Gordon Brown visited in early March, it made sense to ask whether the U.S. could depend on the United Kingdom. After his visit, I think we must also ask whether the U.K. can depend on the U.S. That's a point that I'll return to towards the close of my remarks.

Let me begin with the United Kingdom and with the possibility that it may in future not be a reliable ally for the United States. The United Kingdom is in the middle of a long transition, one that began in the late 1940s. This is, on the surface, a transition from Britain's historical role as a great and imperial power.

But even more fundamental, in my view, is a transition that has largely escaped the notice of Americans. The Victorian model that made the American image of Britain is breaking down, and the breakdown of this model is affecting Britain's politics, society, and culture. These changes, in turn, are steadily making Britain both less willing and less able to project power in the world and to stand up for the liberal principles on which the Victorian model was based.

This poses a serious challenge to U.S. policymakers. Politics matter, but the British transition goes beyond politics: It is a civilizational shift that will take great leadership and the pressure of terrible events to alter.

The “Three Circles” of British Foreign Policy

If we want to understand where we are today, it helps to know where we've come from. In the late

Talking Points

- In Churchill's vision, the relationship between the U.S. and Britain would endure because both were liberal, English-speaking democracies.
- The Victorian model that made the American image of Britain is breaking down, and this is affecting Britain's politics, society, and culture, steadily making Britain less willing and able to project power and stand up for the liberal principles on which the Victorian model was based.
- If Britain is being Europeanized, the U.S. could stay closer to it by Europeanizing itself. In the broad perspective of domestic policy, that is clearly what President Obama intends to achieve.
- To adopt this vision, even for a time, would be a tremendous defeat for the assertive, liberal values that lay at the heart of Churchill's vision and on which the Anglo–American alliance was founded.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/hl1116.qfm

Produced by The Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

1940s, British foreign policy was characterized by the “Three Circles.” This model, popularized by Winston Churchill, defined Britain as a separate, great power that had to remain situated in the intersection of three circles, each of which represented a vital British interest.

First—and this was Churchill’s order—there was the U.S. As Churchill put it in his closing words to his Cabinet in 1955, “Never allow yourselves to be separated from the Americans.”¹ Churchill’s logic rested on the fact that Britain had worldwide interests. The U.S. was not only a liberal democracy: It was the only power that was willing and able to defend Britain’s core interests. Any clash between the U.S. and Britain—as, for instance, in the Suez Crisis of 1956—was therefore foolish: Britain had more to lose than to win from it.

The second circle was the British Empire, then undergoing its transformation into the Commonwealth. As late as 1969, a Gallup poll found that 34 percent of British people identified the Commonwealth as the most important part of the world for Britain, on a par with those who said America.² The reasons for this should be obvious. There were ties of “kith and kin.” The Commonwealth was an important market for British industry. And, above all, the Commonwealth stood—at least in the minds of many—for Britain’s contributions to liberal civilization and progress.

The third circle—and distinctly the least important—was Europe. Here, Britain had to be involved for basically negative reasons. Trade with Europe mattered, but it was British security that was at stake: 1914 and 1939 had shown that Britain could not afford to ignore the continent. In Churchill’s vision, Britain’s role was to be a cheerleader for Western European reconciliation and union and—alongside the U.S.—a provider of military backbone

in opposition to the USSR. Anything more than that would pull Britain too deeply into Europe for it to keep its place in the other two circles.

The story of Britain since the late 1940s is the story of how, and why, those circles have changed. The Commonwealth, it is hardly necessary to say, has shrunk to insignificance: Today, only one in five Britons can name any of its activities, and only a third of young people can identify one of its members. Of course, the fact that the British public is ignorant about the Commonwealth does not necessarily make it unimportant, but British priorities are adequately summarized by the fact that Britain spends about 20 pence a head on the Commonwealth annually. By contrast, Britain spends about 10 pounds per head on NATO and 54 pounds per head on the European Union.³

Still, the question of ignorance is an important one. In Churchill’s vision, the relationship between the U.S. and Britain had to, and would, endure because both were liberal, English-speaking democracies. The alliance of interests was real, but it rested on an alliance of ideals.

Declining British Sympathy with the U.S.

But surveys of British public opinion show that this alliance can no longer be taken for granted. In 2006, a BBC poll found that Britons believed that the U.S.’s influence on the world was mostly negative by a margin of 57 percent to 36 percent. This sentiment went hand in hand with considerable ignorance. For instance, 58 percent of Britons agreed that polygamy was legal in parts of the U.S.⁴ Indeed, all the illusions Britons held about the U.S. stemmed from a liberal-left world view.

At the root of the decline of British sympathy with the U.S., therefore, is the belief that, unlike Britain and the continent, the U.S. is simply not a

1. David Cannadine, “Taking the Strain,” BBC News, July 31, 2006, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/5230612.stm (March 18, 2009).
2. Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, “A True Agent of Progress,” *Guardian*, March 9, 2009, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/mar/09/britishidentity> (March 18, 2009).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Alex Spillius, “British Anti-Americanism ‘Based on Misconceptions,’” *Daily Telegraph*, August 18, 2008, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/2575395/British-anti-Americanism-based-on-misconceptions.html> (March 18, 2009).

“modern” country. This belief says far more about how British culture and society have changed in recent decades than it does about the U.S.

It is true that when it comes to practicalities much of this resentment fades away. When asked where they would want to spend a holiday, 45 percent of Britons name the United States, as opposed to only 25 percent for France.⁵ But the sentiment, because it is political, is important nonetheless.

Nor is the decline of sympathy solely a function of President George W. Bush’s tenure in office. Barack Obama’s election did produce an improvement in British feelings towards the U.S., but it elevated the U.S. only from ninth place to sixth, about on par with Germany. (Japan, by the way, now ranks ninth, just barely in positive plus/minus territory.⁶) In other words, even now, the British like us just about as well as they like the Germans. Think about that for a while.

It is not that Britain, at least on a civic level, has warmed towards Europe as it has cooled towards the U.S. Rather, it is cool towards everyone, with the notable exception of the Australians. There is less love, politically, for the U.S., but also no enthusiasm for joining the Euro. With the marginal exceptions of Hungary and Latvia, British opinion is the most Euroskeptical in the EU.⁷

What is replacing the U.S. is nothing in particular, except a grumpy dissatisfaction with Britain and its place in the world. Of Churchill’s three circles, one has all but disappeared. The other two—Europe and the U.S.—have come to be of about equal importance, but the U.S. one has shrunk. Simply put, Britain is a more self-absorbed, less expansive society than it was in the post-war era, and while it is more prosperous, it is also less happy and less sure of itself.

Now, clearly, being dissatisfied, even grumpily so, is not the worst thing in the world. Japan has oscillated between political stability and revolu-

tion, but there is limited potential for radical change in Britain today. Note that I do not say that there is no potential. In the medium term, Scotland is extremely likely to flake away from the no-longer United Kingdom. We can speculate on the effect this will have on politics in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but what is certain is that it will signal a further retreat from the distinctly British political culture that seemed so strong at the end of World War II.

The other source of potential political instability is Europe—which is ironic, since in Churchill’s vision Britain was supposed to export stability to Europe, not import instability from Europe. In late January, Britain was hit by a wave of wildcat strikes at power plants. The strikes began when workers realized that the operating companies had the right under EU law to hire foreign workers for positions in Britain. This was not new, but what the strikes revealed was that many workers—and, for that matter, many other Britons—simply did not realize what they had been signed up for.

Here too, as with the Commonwealth and the U.S., ignorance matters a great deal, though in this case it redounds to the EU’s benefit. But of course the EU does a lot more than allow continentals to take “British jobs.” The EU is now responsible, through the directives it issues, for making much of the law in the land in Britain: The Victorian concept of parliamentary sovereignty has been very badly eroded. In good times, this is not likely to cause difficulties, but these are not good times. Therefore, the single most likely source of systemic change in British politics is a sudden popular reaction against the fact that Britain no longer governs itself. For that reason alone, the January strikes were portentous.

Breakdown of the Victorian Model

The decay of parliamentary sovereignty and the rise of Scottish nationalism cut close to the heart of Britain’s 19th century achievements. The evidence

5. “When It Comes to Practicalities British Anti-Americanism Fades Away,” *America in the World*, August 21, 2008, at <http://americaintheworld.typepad.com/home/2008/08/when-it-comes-t.html> (March 18, 2009).

6. “Obama Effect Lifts America Above France, Germany and Japan in Esteem of Britons,” *America in the World*, November 11, 2008, at <http://americaintheworld.typepad.com/home/2008/11/obama-effect-li.html> (March 18, 2009).

7. European Commission, “Public Opinion in the European Union: First Results,” *Eurobarometer 70*, December 2008, at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_first_en.pdf (March 18, 2009).

that the Victorian model is failing is everywhere, from declining trust in the political system to rising illegitimacy and violent crime. And the Victorian model was, in the classic sense of the term, a liberal model. Because the state commanded the confidence of the people, it could fulfill the limited duties it assigned itself. Central among these, of course, was the protection of British interests abroad, which flourished and grew mightily under its care.

Britain's loss of faith in the Victorian model, therefore, is not important simply because it is linked to the rise of the British underclass, as vital as this is to Britons. It matters to the U.S., because it was that liberal model that built Britain's worldwide interests and which justified Britain's worldwide alliance with the U.S. that protected these interests. As that model fades, Britain is turning inwards. This is not quite isolationism. Rather, it is a resentful sense that there are no good alternatives. And in a way, that is right: If Britain rejects the Commonwealth, the U.S., and Europe and does not believe in itself, then it indeed has no options. From three circles, Britain looks as if it is moving towards no circles.

But there is one crucial difference between the American and European circles. Britain is America's ally, but it is a member of the European Union. Europe is therefore locked into British policymaking. There is little enthusiasm for the EU among the British public, but that has never mattered. What matters is that the British political elite are strongly European, and in a curious way, their preferences are reinforced by the broader British disengagement with the world.

Though it poses as a force for world progress, the EU is in reality a reflection of Europe's post-1945 desire to bring history to an end. The EU wants, fundamentally, to ensure that nothing ruffles Europe's tranquility. To that end, the EU will always diminish the significance of foreign crises—witness, for instance, the EU's reaction to the Russian inva-

sion of Georgia. What troubles the EU is never the crisis. It is the possibility that the U.S. or individual European states might respond to the crisis.

While there is little popular sympathy in Britain for the EU itself, there is more sympathy with this European spirit of disengagement. In a word, Britain is being Europeanized, and that means—barring a sudden domestic reaction against the EU—that the British political elite are likely to be able to continue their slow but steady drift towards Europe that has marked much of the past 50 years.

The financial crisis is only likely to accelerate that trend. Gordon Brown, for instance, has lined up with France and Germany in the run-up to the G-20 Summit in April and has accepted proposals for Europe-wide financial regulation that he previously resisted.⁸ More broadly, Americans are not widely aware of just how fragile Britain's financial position is. No one knows the size of the liabilities Britain has taken on by guaranteeing its banking sector, but one reasonable estimate is that they amount to 250 percent of GDP.

And that is not the worst of it. Of the 7 trillion pounds on deposit in the U.K., 4 trillion is denominated in foreign currencies.⁹ This problem of foreign currency obligations was exactly what destroyed Iceland's banks and brought that country to bankruptcy. That is not an unthinkable outcome for Britain over the next 12 months.

Near-Term Strains

As a result—and even leaving aside broader cultural changes—the Anglo-American alliance will in the near future face strains on two fronts.

First, Britain will be pressed to internationalize its financial sector, which will, as witnessed by Gordon Brown, lead it to pressure the U.S. to accept similar controls. That will be intensely controversial in this country.

Second, there is no likelihood that Britain will increase its military spending. Last year, Britain spent only 2.2 percent of its GDP on defense, the

8. Ted R. Bromund, "Europe's Answer to the Financial Crisis? Bigger Government," Heritage Foundation Foundry, February 24, 2009, at <http://blog.heritage.org/2009/02/24/europe%e2%80%99s-answer-to-the-financial-crisis-bigger-government>.

9. Ted R. Bromund, "Britain's Public Debt: Up By 1.4 Trillion Pounds This Week," Heritage Foundation Foundry, February 20, 2009, at <http://blog.heritage.org/2009/02/20/britain%e2%80%99s-public-debt-up-by-14-trillion-pounds-this-week>.

lowest level since 1933.¹⁰ While there is no budgetary reason why the overgrown British state could not redirect spending to the military, this appears to be a political impossibility. As a result, the U.S. will increasingly be forced to go it alone in Afghanistan, and the U.K. will continue its retreat from strategic reality. Britain's National Security Strategy already makes for gloomy reading, with its ridiculous claim that Islamic extremism has "very little support among communities in this country."¹¹

Ideological trends and financial exigencies alike will only lend further support to this head-in-the-sand attitude, which exemplifies the broader incoherence of Britain's grand strategy. It is a mistake to believe that the fear of domestic Islamic radicalism is the main driver of British policy: Though it does matter, the broader loss of civilizational confidence, now exacerbated by the financial crisis, matters a good deal more.

And there is now a further source of concern: the attitude of the United States. From 1783 to 1991, the U.S., by and large, was the awkward partner in the Anglo-American relationship. From the end of the Cold War until today, the U.K. has been the awkward one. But we may now be entering a phase in which both sides are awkward simultaneously. The American people remain relentlessly Anglophile: The U.K. is regularly the second most popular foreign country (ranking slightly behind Canada) in surveys of U.S. opinion.¹²

But President Obama's dismissive treatment of Gordon Brown earlier this month appears to be part of a broader strategy. This strategy seeks to appease foreign policy problems—and to allow the Administration to focus on domestic policy—by conceding "spheres of interest" to powers such as China,

Russia, and Iran, often at the expense of the U.S.'s traditional friends. This is not a policy that will make for close relations with Britain, both because Britain is our most traditional friend and because the Administration is likely to emphasize relations with the EU (which in practice means France and Germany) at Britain's expense. The EU, in short, will likely be treated as another power to be appeased, an approach that is all too clear in the Administration's support for an EU army and for France's reintegration into NATO.¹³

If that is the Administration's policy, then the near-term future for the Anglo-American alliance is bleak. Even Britain's long-standing argument that it must seek to bridge differences between the U.S. and Europe would make little sense in a world in which the U.S. was cold-shouldering Britain.

True, this American policy is not likely either to enjoy success or to endure for very long. As Harold Macmillan wisely remarked, most U.S. Administrations come into office believing they should talk to everyone except Britain, only to realize that the British are, in fact, the only people that Americans can have a genuine conversation with. But that realization will be some time in coming, and until it does come, the Anglo-American relationship will remain strained on both sides.

Conclusion

Of course, there is one alternative. If Britain is being Europeanized, the U.S. could stay closer to it by Europeanizing itself. In the broad perspective of domestic policy, that is clearly what President Obama intends to achieve.

As the European alternative is based on the faulty belief that history can be brought to an end, it is not

10. Press release, "Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, February 19, 2009, Table 3, at <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2009/p09-009.pdf> (February 25, 2009).

11. *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an Interdependent World*, U.K. Cabinet Office, 2008, p. 10, at http://interactive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/documents/security/national_security_strategy.pdf (March 18, 2009).

12. Jeffrey M. Jones, "As British P.M. Visits, Britain Reigns as Top U.S. Ally," Gallup, March 3, 2009, p. 2, at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116272/British-Visits-Britain-Reigns-Top-Ally.aspx> (March 13, 2009).

13. Sally McNamara, "The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy: How It Threatens Transatlantic Security," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2250, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/bg2250.cfm>, and Nile Gardiner and Sally McNamara, "The U.S. and U.K. Must Oppose French Plans to Weaken NATO," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2285, February 10, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm2285.cfm>.

likely to work; but if we do go down that road, we and the British will find returning from it as painful as the illusion on which it is based is pleasant. To adopt this vision, even for a time, would be a tremendous defeat for the assertive, liberal values that lay at the heart of Churchill's vision of the interlocking circles and on which the Anglo-American alliance was founded.

—*Ted R. Bromund, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were delivered at a panel on "Anchor Allies Adrift: Can the United States Depend on Japan and Great Britain?" held by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research in Washington, D.C.*