

The US-UK Special Relationship and the War on Terror

Charles Skinner

(Lecture, November 8, 2006)

The term “special relationship” conjures up two images: first, the Second World War and the extraordinary relationship between President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill; second, the recent War on Iraq and the very close working relationship between President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair. The second example has taken on politically charged overtones because of strong feelings about the Iraq War. These feelings have obscured what I believe to be an important development in the history of cooperation between states—a development that is of more lasting significance, even, than the war.

To explain what I mean, I will talk about three topics: the history of cooperation among states, the case for increased international cooperation in today’s world, and what is happening in the special relationship as a model for that cooperation. In conclusion I will ask where we go from here.

Cooperation among states is a phenomenon much less studied than conflict. We know a lot about what drives states to take up arms against each other, much less about the bases and the patterns of cooperation. Prior to the twentieth century, in fact, most examples of cooperation between states were temporary alliances in times of war. Even then, the cooperation was limited to the combined efforts of specific forces, such as the unsuccessful cooperation of French and Spanish fleets in their battle with the Royal Navy at Trafalgar 200 years ago or the more successful cooperation of French and American forces in the American War for Independence.

The first half of the twentieth century saw what most observers would probably call a failed attempt of nations to cooperate on a more ambitious level, namely the League of Nations. The League’s main goal was to prevent a new war. In that goal it failed. The means that the League of Nations was to employ to that end in its all too brief history included disarmament and a collective security pact. In the face of conflict or the threat of conflict it could and did order economic sanctions.

The League’s history reminds us that the main actors on the international stage remain the nation states—a situation that has not changed down to the present.

The Second World War, notably, was followed by an effort to establish a much more ambitious international organization, the United Nations. The UN was supposed to take on many more tasks than the League, tasks which are evoked by the names of some of the UN's subsidiary bodies, such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and the IAEA.

If we can look back now on the Cold War as an interlude that only “interrupted” temporarily the birth of a new world order and the development of a new organization of nation states, we should also recall that the Cold War saw the birth of two organizations that have proved most successful in creating a framework for the cooperation of nation states: NATO and the European Union.

NATO, of course, might be seen “only” as an evolution of the phenomenon of temporary military alliances among nation states, but it has taken that cooperation a step further in (1) the cooperation of its member states in long-term defense planning and in (2) the creation of an integrated military command—two features that France, one of the original nation states, has withdrawn from. However, I would point out that NATO has survived the demise of its *raison d'être*—the Soviet threat—and I will come back in a minute to the significance of this development.

A word first, however, about the European Union: the EU might be seen as the most ambitious effort to date to overcome the autonomy of nation states and to foster international cooperation. Its scope began with economic cooperation, but it has expanded to include not only what is called “justice and home affairs” but “even” a security and defense component.

Finally, I would note that since the end of the Cold War, despite the “difficult” episodes of Kosovo and Iraq, the case of world cooperation in the United Nations has become increasingly compelling.

I would suggest that the recent histories of these three organizations—NATO, the EU, and the United Nations—all point to a little-noticed development, namely, the emergence of a compelling need for cooperation.

What I am suggesting is that just as NATO was created to meet the Soviet threat; it has been kept because its allies (and the world) need its capabilities. The case is so compelling, in fact, that more and more states are cooperating with NATO, beginning with its former enemies, the neutral states of Europe, then even Russia, and now more and more states around the world.

Second, despite the United Nations' failure as an organization to provide a framework for international action on Kosovo and its failure to find a way to bridge differences over Iraq that would enable nations to deal with the situation, the nations of the world have all come back to the UN as a forum for cooperation.

Finally, while one might point to the failure of the European Union's constitution as suggesting that there are limits to international cooperation, even among those states most committed to the project, we should not forget that it was above all the attraction of NATO and the European project that so effectively has overcome the division of Europe.

Basically, then, my argument is that the continuing commitment of nation states to these three organizations as forms of cooperation points to the need of those states—as the main international actors—to have such tools available to tackle today's challenges.

What are these challenges? They include the need for a cooperative response to natural disasters such as the Indian Ocean tsunami or the earthquake in Pakistan, or potential pandemics such as avian flu, as well as the even more traditional motive for international cooperation, security threats such as the threats of WMD proliferation, and—since September 11—the global terrorist threat.

So, perhaps now it is clear how I am finally going to get to the announced topic for this talk: the US-UK special relationship and the war on terror. I see terrorism as only one—if clearly one of the most compelling—of the global challenges of the present.

And, given the inadequacies of even the most successful forms of international cooperation—the UN, NATO, and the EU—what I am suggesting is that we look to the US-UK special relationship as a pathfinder to more effective forms of international cooperation. We should recall that US-UK cooperation in the Second World War established a benchmark against which all subsequent international cooperation was measured.

US-UK military cooperation was clearly the model for NATO. US and UK views also played a key role in defining the UN's ambition, even if this ambition is still unrealized today.

What I am trying to say is that one should put aside any differences one might have with specific policies pursued by the present US President and the present British Prime Minister and recognize that their cooperation and the inter-governmental cooperation between the US government and Her Majesty's government have established a new gold standard against which all other international cooperation should be measured. It is, in other words, not the substance of the cooperation but the quality of it that is important.

Admittedly, a key element of this qualitatively more intense cooperation consists of, and is grounded in, the incredibly close interaction of these two leaders. One need only see the cramped telephone booth in the Cabinet War Rooms in the cellars under Whitehall that Winston Churchill used to call Franklin Roosevelt and compare those two leaders' World War II communications to the secure

video conferences Prime Minister Blair and President Bush hold nearly every week to appreciate the difference.

There is a lot of, frankly, very tendentious rhetoric about Prime Minister Blair being President Bush's poodle. If the truth be known, however, most world leaders envy this close relationship and Blair's influence. They would like to participate in as active a relationship.

But again, what I would argue is significant about this relationship is not its uniqueness but its typicality in an age of instant electronic communications and its potential for just such emulation. World leaders all know each other today and talk to each other a lot. And they do not just talk; they also act, together, but not nearly often enough.

In the US-UK case, of course, it is the fact that the close relationship has become a working relationship that is so extraordinary. Both countries' leaders are prepared to act to tackle problems. And acting together has become routine. Thus, the close working relationship at the top is important but it is not the only essential component in today's path-breaking special relationship.

It has been the cooperation in the Iraq War—like the cooperation between the US and UK in the Second World War—that has helped institutionalize the closeness of the relationship. Indeed, there is nothing like the complex task of managing a joint war effort to bring governments together.

Cooperation exists at the top, as we have already seen. That cooperation is an important incentive and asset for cooperation at lower levels, but it is not the beginning and end of US-UK cooperation. To begin with, it also runs all the way down the line to the soldiers at risk in Iraq.

This cooperation in Iraq has not been without its failings, but by modern standards it has been extraordinary. It extends throughout the US and UK armed forces, and it reaches into other parts of government as well, since a key part of the Iraq effort has also been the reconstruction effort.

Reconstruction is a capacity that governments are only beginning to master. It is a challenge whether the destruction is wrought by humankind or nature. Indeed, the main point of my talk is not to extol US-UK military cooperation for all of its achievements, but to point to the new dimension of US-UK cooperation, from cooperation in reconstruction efforts to the cooperation in the war against terror.

Many Europeans, and indeed many Britons, do not like to call their efforts to tackle the global threat of terrorism a "war," but that does not mean they do not see terrorism as a global threat.

What has happened in the last four years is that the US and UK have developed a new dimension to their cooperation in the area that might—for want of a better term—be called "homeland security." The US has created a Department of Homeland Security. The UK has not, although the opposition

Conservative Party has called for it to do so. However, it has been at pains to ensure that the various elements of its homeland security apparatus are linked to their US counterparts.

The first foreign trip that Tom Ridge—a name well known in Pennsylvania—took was to the UK. Subsequently a joint cooperation body was established to create a joint agenda. Links have been established to share early warning data about terrorists, and this summer's arrests (in summer 2006) are only the most recent fruits of this cooperation.

I would be the first to acknowledge that we need to keep up and improve these efforts. Homeland security cooperation needs to be developed further and extended into other fields. In particular, we need to establish a close working relationship up and down the line throughout government, and across government to include Congress and Parliament. Ideally, the strong personal bond between Americans and Britons should also be part of this effort, for our own sakes and to set a good example for the rest of the world.

In summary, let me give you a quick, very cursory overview of the elements that make up the US-UK relationship and the qualities that make it “special” as well as the areas where we could do better:

- First, an extraordinarily close intelligence-sharing relationship that dates back to the Second World War and that forms the basis for the common, shared Anglo-American view of the world and that informs US and UK decisions about policy.
- Second, an equally long tradition of military cooperation that has been renewed in Afghanistan and Iraq, but which, in my judgment, could be further intensified and developed.
- Third, an intense and close relationship between leaders that must be as effective as the Blair-Clinton or Blair-Bush relationships.
- A key quality of this relationship has been the British willingness to tackle issues. There may be criticism of Blair's decision to get involved in Iraq, since opponents of the war think that if he had opposed it, it might not have happened. But to me, as someone who spent a career looking for allies to tackle problems, Prime Minister Blair's readiness—and indeed British readiness—to roll up their sleeves and do something is refreshing. It needs to be replicated elsewhere. Moreover, one finds this unfortunately all-too-unique British quality in other Blair initiatives, most notably his G-8 Presidency agenda for tackling African development and climate change. Here one does detect differences with the current US administration, but there are two key points to note: First, British readiness to tackle problems, and, second, British success at eliciting US

cooperation. A question is, will this British readiness survive Blair? My answer is that it needs to, and we need more of it around the world.

- Fourth, this close relationship at the top needs to be replicated throughout both governments' leadership. In my experience, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw took Madeline Albright's good relationship with Robin Cook a step further first with Colin Powell and then with Condi Rice. This personal achievement of Straw's has been obscured by the Bush-Blair relationship, but if anything, it was even more intense and, in my view, needs to continue. Happily, this has been the case with Straw's successor, Margaret Beckett, and has not been limited to the US-UK relationship. Other cabinet ministers have developed similar relationships, although the nature of their work does not require such intense interaction, but I believe there needs to be more close cooperation. Intelligence cooperation is good; defense cooperation could be better. Secretary Rumsfeld is more his own man than a team player. Homeland security cooperation is coming along. One can run through the list of cabinet departments in both governments.
- Fifth, cooperation among bureaucracies can also be improved. In my experience, there is no foreign ministry that is easier to work with than the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (the British State Department). Part of this is language. Part is the already existing openness. But another big part is this same British willingness to tackle problems. UK membership in the EU adds a twist to this relationship, but since we in the US usually want to work with the EU, it is a twist that is replicated everywhere and that we need to learn how to live with (and make more effective).
- Indeed, sixth, just as the EU is found wanting, we need to tackle the issue of effectiveness in international cooperation across the board: UN reform is one—or, in fact, many parts of this process. Making the EU more effective is another. The same goes with NATO, which needs constant updating.

There are many other dimensions to the US-UK relationship, not the least of which is the business, trade, and economic part of it. But before concluding I would like to highlight one other essential element: The US and UK share a large pool of citizenry that know each other personally very well. It is this shared personal knowledge that keeps people in Britain from being stamped into anti-Americanism by political differences.

And, I would argue that one of our most compelling needs is the capacity to have political differences while keeping them in perspective of the larger sphere of shared values and goals.

Is there a final insight I could offer that would point to where we go from here?

Clearly, people in government are concerned that the relationship will survive the departure of Tony Blair. Blair was extremely effective in building an unparalleled relationship first with President Clinton and then with President Bush.

He was less successful with President Chirac, but his differences, and President Bush's, with the French President only underline—to my mind—the necessity of establishing a culture of cooperation that keeps political differences in check and in the proper perspective.

International cooperation is too vital today to sacrifice it to personal or even legitimate political differences. So, my conclusion is that we must all work to ensure that today's close US-UK relationship not only survives the departure of the current leaders but that it is replicated around the world.

Institutional cooperation needs to be strengthened up and down the line, and whether in the EU or elsewhere, cooperation among states and international organizations needs to meet the pragmatic test of reacting quickly and effectively to today's problems. This it seems to me is the lesson of Katrina and the lesson of this summer's crisis in Lebanon. And Lebanon offers the encouragement that we are getting there, if not quickly enough.