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Rethinking That 'Special Relationship' Between the U.S. and Britain

By GEOFFREY WHEATCROFT

Every four years, as the American people embark on the task of electing a president, Europeans are reminded that they simply don't understand America. At least I don't, and I like to think that I know the United States better than many Englishmen.

I first set foot in America 46 years ago during the summer before entering university, and I've since visited as often as I could. Although I live in the west of England, I write largely for American publications. I visit Austin, Tex., from time to time to lecture at the University of Texas and fully consider myself a long-distance Longhorns fan. (Yes, I know, news of the Red River massacre reached even Somerset, but as an Arsenal supporter, I have been emotionally conditioned for calamity.)

And yet I know just what G. K. Chesterton meant when he said that nowhere on earth does an Englishman feel as much a stranger as in the United States. That may be truer now, as I see very clearly that our two continents are drifting apart. Far from the world becoming flatter or smaller, the Atlantic is growing wider, politically and emotionally. For much of the past century the two sides have been bound together by what now appear to have been temporary circumstances — the series of military partnerships from World War I through the cold war. There were deep underpinnings for what Winston Churchill first called the special relationship, but what's curious is that we should think it still exists. Will history see the years of "Atlanticism" as a passing episode, before America turns to a manifest destiny elsewhere?

Election time only emphasizes our differences. I'm not quite sure when American politics became a contest in piety, but so it has, in a way that is simply unimaginable today in Western Europe. Faith is more competitive than even 11 years ago when George W. Bush won the election, after a fashion. Mitt Romney allays doubts about his Mormonism by nervously assuring us that Jesus Christ is his Lord and Savior. But then Rick Perry says that, too — as does [Barack Obama](#).

It's no wonder that this parade of faith has Europeans looking on with perplexity and derision. Despite the First Amendment, it's Europe that effectively separates church and state. Devout American politicians who criticize a godless continent may forget that secular European leaders merely reflect their electorates, who have after all tolerated Silvio (Bunga Bunga) Berlusconi and Nicolas Sarkozy — and even his erstwhile rival Dominique Strauss-Kahn. While Tony Blair's rather weird memoir contains a line at the end saying he has always had "a passion bigger than politics, which is religion," that shows only what an oddity Blair was in his own country. And he knew it. When, as prime minister, Blair was asked about the question of faith, his press officer snapped, "We don't do God"; and when another interviewer once asked if he had ever prayed with Bush the Younger, Blair flustered with embarrassment. Perhaps that's because in my country we have a Church of England, "by law established," whose supreme governor is the queen — and whose services are attended by about 2 percent of the population.

The continental drift should have been perceptible decades ago. In 1967, Edward Heath, then leader of the British Conservative Party, gave a series of lectures at Harvard in which he presciently foresaw "a shift in power in the modern world," in the form of a reorientation of American interest from Europe to Asia. This turn has taken longer than he might have guessed — when he became prime minister in 1970, Heath was distinctly cool toward Washington — but it is now plainly happening. After all, America kept out of Europe's way until events forced it, reluctantly, to become a European power.

Even when prime ministers invoked the so-called special Anglo-American relationship, the appearance of personal amity often concealed sharp tensions, a point made by the historian Richard Aldous in his forthcoming book "[Reagan and Thatcher: The Difficult Relationship](#)." The first decade of the present century really did see an intimate meeting of minds, over Iraq and much else. In his memoir "[Decision Points](#)," Bush calls Blair "my closest partner and best friend on the world stage," which was true enough, even if not quite what the British people bargained for when they elected Blair.

Religion aside, political differences between the countries have been formed by profoundly diverse historical experiences. If we still use the vocabulary of left and right, then the veteran observer William Pfaff is correct to say that there is no important political party in Western Europe today that does not stand to the left of the Democrats on social issues. Despite all their demographic challenges, European countries are not going to abandon their welfare systems. Nor are they going to lose their aversion to war. While Iraq may have been a high point of the special relationship, it was also the beginning of its end. Whereas many Americans regret the war,

resentment in [David Cameron's](#) Britain — the belief that the country was transformed into a client state of Washington — is more bitter.

While Europe and the United States face grave, though distinctive, economic crises, the other common interests that bound them are fading. Whatever else Angela Merkel may do, she is not going to invade Belgium or Poland, and Putin's Russia, though obnoxious enough, scarcely represents a strategic threat. As to the Middle East, Europe and America are much concerned, but their interests don't necessarily coincide. (The bombing campaign that helped bring down Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi could prove a final hurrah.) [Writing on the Times Op-Ed page recently](#), Jeremi Suri of the University of Texas said that the Obama administration should set three realistic international goals: maintaining the dollar as the credible global reserve currency; halting the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; and cultivating peaceful relations with China. Nowhere was Europe mentioned.

Of course the British and Americans will remain linked by language and culture, as they were long before they became military allies. But it might be time to call it a day on our so-called special relationship. In one of his stirring broadcasts, in the spring of 1941, [Churchill ended with a line from the poet Arthur Hugh Clough](#): "In front, the sun climbs slow, how slowly/But westward, look, the land is bright." The story of this century could be the United States heeding those words, in a way Churchill never imagined.

Geoffrey Wheatcroft, an English journalist and author of [Yo, Blair!](#), is writing a book on the legacy of Winston Churchill.