

# Brexit Diplomacy, Trump, and the UK's "Special Relationship" with the United States

*Klaus Larres*

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,  
Chapel Hill, NC, United States  
*larres@unc.edu*

## Abstract

The much-praised "special relationship" between the US and the UK has had little, if any, relevance for President Donald Trump. After the Brexit referendum of June 2016 Prime Minister Theresa May and many of the "Brexiters" in the Conservative Party hoped that a rejuvenation of relations with the U.S., perhaps by means of free trade treaty, would counter-balance any loss of political and economic influence due to the UK's departure from the European Union. Some of Trump's rhetoric seemed to indicate this. He repeatedly praised the country for its desire to get back "its sovereignty" and "control over its borders." In reality Trump was so focused on the realization of his "America First" policy that it was unlikely that he would be inclined to grant any special favors or generous trade terms to the UK, "special relationship" or not.

## Keywords

Brexit – transatlantic relations – "special relationship" – Donald Trump – Theresa May

Since Donald Trump's inauguration as president in January 2017, U.S. foreign relations have been volatile and unpredictable.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, this has included relations with Britain, traditionally Washington's closest ally. For Britain and its self-inflicted Brexit dilemma this is highly unfortunate. The country expected that once it had discarded its membership of 45 years and left the European

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an abridged version of Larres, Klaus. "The Highest Level of Special? Brexit and the UK's 'special relationship' with the United States." *Krasno Analysis* 2018. <https://www.krasnoevents.com/krasno-analysis.html>.

Union in March 2019, it would be able to fall back and rejuvenate its relations (not least its trade relations) with the Commonwealth countries and, above all, the United States. In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum of June 2016 Prime Minister Theresa May went out of her way to emphasize that London wished to strengthen and deepen its relations with the United States.<sup>2</sup> Despite the much acclaimed “special relationship” that goes back to the days of Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, Washington seems to be quite unwilling to treat the UK as a privileged partner.<sup>3</sup> Trump’s mantra of “America First” clearly spells out the nationalist and protectionist policy that has begun to dominate U.S. politics. While Trump at times indicated that he was enthusiastic about negotiating a free trade agreement with London, this did not mean that he would grant any particular generous terms.

Gradually this has also dawned on British politicians, who have become increasingly cooler toward the Trump administration. Not only was Trump’s state visit to the UK in the summer of 2018 criticized by many, the outburst by Nicholas Soames, a grandson of Winston Churchill and a pillar of the establishment, indicates that the mutual respect between the two countries has all but disappeared. President Trump’s no-show – due to bad weather – at the November 9, 2018 commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the First World War, led to a “scathing rebuke” from Sir Nicholas, as the BBC put it. In a Tweet Soames referred to the U.S. president as a “pathetic inadequate,” who “couldn’t even defy the weather to pay his respects to The Fallen.”<sup>4</sup>

### The Historical Dimension

The “special relationship” was the brainchild of Winston Churchill, who first referred to it in his famous “iron curtain” speech of March 1946 in Fulton, Missouri.<sup>5</sup> Britain and the U.S. had already cooperated very closely ever since Washington joined the fight against Hitler in December 1941. Pearl Harbor and then Hitler’s declaration of war on America enabled Franklin Roosevelt to quickly dispose of any still lingering isolationist feelings in both the nation

2 See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/04/theresa-may-britains-relationship-with-the-us-will-be-strong-des/>, Sept. 4, 2016 (accessed, Oct. 27, 2018).

3 For a somewhat different interpretation, see Marsh, Steve. “The US, Brexit and Anglo-American Relations.” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 16 (3) (2018), 272–94.

4 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46168995>, Nov. 11, 2018 (accessed, Nov.12, 2018).

5 Larres, Klaus. “Churchill’s ‘Iron Curtain’ Speech in Context: The Attempt to Achieve a ‘Good Understanding on All Points’ with Stalin’s Soviet Union.” *International History Review* 40 (1) (2017), 86–107.

and Congress. The Atlantic Charter of 14 August 1941 was symbolic of this new alliance that both countries had entered into. However, the process was not all smooth. Anglo-American disagreements existed on issues of de-colonization and the sovereignty and self-determination of nations.<sup>6</sup>

In the course of the war there were severe differences over war strategy, relations with the Soviet Union and post-war planning concepts, to name but a few. It was a tense and competitive alliance, but both nations made strenuous attempts to work together. Britain was clearly dependent on U.S. resources and financial as well as military support. Thus, the myth of the "special relationship" was born in Churchill's fertile mind. It helped of course that both countries were democracies, spoke the same language and drew on a similar though by no means identical outlook on international affairs, but the U.S. was only rarely persuaded by nostalgic sentiments. "Special relationship" or not, America's national interests always came first.<sup>7</sup>

Once Churchill had departed (he retired in April 1955) it became even more difficult for London to rely on its special status in Washington. The "special relationship," for instance, did not stop President Eisenhower from forcing Britain (and France) to abandon the retaking of the Suez Canal in early November 1956.<sup>8</sup> "How could we possibly support Britain and France," the president told his National Security Council in early November 1956, "and in doing so we lose the whole Arab world?"<sup>9</sup>

After the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan claimed to have been regularly consulted by President John F. Kennedy throughout the crisis. Nothing was further from the truth; Kennedy had merely informed him in a few phone conversations about the developments.<sup>10</sup> At the Nassau conference in December 1962 Macmillan also had to implore Kennedy to offer Britain the use of America's new Polaris missile. The UK needed them to actually have a vehicle onto which to fit its nuclear warheads.<sup>11</sup>

Still, Britain could be hard-nosed too and was also quite capable of defending its national interests. During the Vietnam War Labour Prime Minister

6 Brinkley, Douglas, and David R. Facey-Crowther, eds. *The Atlantic Charter* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994).

7 See Dumbrell, John. *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

8 Kyle, Keith. *Suez: Britain's End of Empire in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

9 Quoted in "Defence-in-depth: The Significance of Suez 1956: A Reference Point and Turning Point?" Kings College London (accessed, Oct. 28, 2018).

10 See Lucas, Scott. *Macmillan, Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis: Political, Military and Intelligence Aspects* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

11 Ashton, Nigel J. "Harold Macmillan and the 'Golden Days' of Anglo-American Relations Revisited, 1957-1963." *Diplomatic History* 29 (4) (2005), 691-723.

Wilson did not allow himself to be pushed into providing military support to the U.S., since he regarded the war as a lost cause.<sup>12</sup> When in the early 1970s Prime Minister Edward Heath successfully negotiated membership of the European Communities, his relationship with the Nixon administration was not particularly close. Heath actually went out of his way to avoid using the term “special relationship” in order not to annoy his European partners.<sup>13</sup>

The revival of the “special relationship” occurred in the 1980s during the Thatcher-Reagan era. Both politicians got on rather well personally and – more importantly – they shared a very similar philosophical outlook on international affairs. They both detested the Soviet Union, were skeptical of America’s continental European allies and held strongly neo-liberal economic convictions. While Reagan frequently referred to the “special relationship” and was always ready to explain how much he valued it, his practical foreign policy was always based on a conception of U.S. national interest. At the outbreak of the Falklands war in early April 1982, the U.S. did not immediately side with London. In late October 1983, when the U.S. invaded Grenada, a former British colony, to counter an alleged communist coup on the small island, the president did not bother to inform his trusted ally and friend Margaret Thatcher.<sup>14</sup> Thatcher also remained implacably mistrustful of both the Soviet Union and a reunited Germany.<sup>15</sup> Yet during the Reagan-Thatcher era Anglo-American relations were almost as close as they had been in the 1940s.

During the years following the end of the Cold war the “special relationship” would count for less and less. Even before this era had properly commenced, in a speech in Mainz, Germany, in May 1989, President George H. W. Bush referred to Germany and the U.S. as “partners in leadership” within the western alliance. The UK, it seemed, had no particularly distinguished role to play in this context, and British politicians were outraged.<sup>16</sup> Public opinion, however, cared much less. Unlike the liberal elite, for most ordinary Britons the “special relationship” represented a feature of times past. The role of Tony

12 Vickers, Rhiannon. “Harold Wilson, the British Labour Party, and the War in Vietnam.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10 (2) (2008), 41–70.

13 See Spelling, Alex. “Edward Heath and Anglo-American Relations, 1970–1974: A Reappraisal.” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 20 (4) (2009), 638–58.

14 Freedman, Lawrence. *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 2004); O’Shaughnessy, Hugh. *Grenada: an Eyewitness Account of the U.S. Invasion and the Caribbean History that Provoked It* (London: Dodd Mead, 1985).

15 See Larres, Klaus. “Margaret Thatcher and German Unification Revisited.” In *The Revolutions of 1989*, eds. Michael Gehler, et al. (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2015), 355–84.

16 Ibid.

Blair and President George W. Bush in dragging Britain into the invasion of Iraq on behalf of a united Anglo-American front would lead to further mistrust, if not outright hostility toward the U.S. After all, the New Labour government of Tony Blair had persuaded Parliament to vote for the invasion by submitting manipulated documentation regarding the danger of Saddam Hussein's country and the likelihood of his possessing weapons of mass destruction, possibly including nuclear arms.<sup>17</sup> It also soon transpired that Bush had actually told Blair that if he could not participate in the invasion due to domestic political problems, he fully understood and would not ask for British involvement. The prime minister, however, insisted on committing, to avoid Britain losing its treasured status as Washington's foremost ally. Britain might no longer be able to continue "punching above its weight" in global politics, and Blair would likewise lose status as the president's closest confidant.<sup>18</sup>

The Iraq invasion's disastrous six-year long aftermath (the British mission was eventually ended in April 2009) took a high toll on British resources and soldiers, killing, maiming and traumatizing many. Many in Britain began to regard U.S. foreign policy with deep skepticism. Anti-American sentiment had existed before, but the outrage over the Iraq war gave it an entirely new quality.<sup>19</sup> The British public, or so it seemed to many, had been duped into participating in an unnecessary and highly unpredictable foreign policy adventure. With the exception of the 1956 Suez crisis, when Britain also felt badly let down by the U.S., the Iraq war represented the nadir of Anglo-American relations in public opinion since the Second World War.<sup>20</sup>

The Obama administration did not invest heavily in re-energizing the "special relationship." Some commentators have argued that this had to do with the colonial legacies of Obama's family past, but much more importantly a re-evaluation of the U.S. strategic position in a changing global landscape, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. In the run-up to the referendum in June 2016, President Obama declared repeatedly that being a member of the EU was

17 UK government, *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: the Assessment of the British Government* (London: The Stationary Office, 2002).

18 See Suskind, Ron. *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004); Kampfnier, John. *Blair's Wars* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

19 See for instance Kohut, Andrew, and Bruce Stokes. *America Against the World: How We Are Different and Why We Are Disliked* (London: St. Martin's Griffin, 2007); Sweig, Julia E. *Friendly Fire* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

20 Strong, James R., ed. *Public Opinion: Legitimacy and Tony Blair's War in Iraq* (London: Routledge, 2017); Nineham, Chris. *The People v Tony Blair: Politics, the Media and the Anti-War Movement* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2013).

one of Britain's strongest advantages from the U.S. point of view. In April 2016 Obama flew to London to make this point in person, but it proved to be in vain.<sup>21</sup>

Both during and after the referendum, the Brexiteers within the Conservative Party kept referring to Britain's traditionally close relations with the U.S. as one of the pillars of a "truly global Britain."<sup>22</sup> "Global Britain" would mean connecting with other leading economic powers through free trade agreements once the country had freed itself "from the shackles of the EU." In this context the "special relationship" made a re-appearance, at least rhetorically, as a major concept for defining British foreign policy. Britain's elite nostalgically revived the notion of close Anglo-American relations as portrayed by Churchill back in 1946.

### Donald Trump and the "Special Relationship": "the Highest Level of Special"?

Already as presidential candidate Trump made clear his sympathy for Britain leaving the EU. He even indicated that he was not too concerned whether or not the EU might break up as a result.<sup>23</sup> Initially, however, Trump refrained from commenting on the looming referendum. In March 2016 he said somewhat ingenuously that he did not "want to make a comment about the UK leaving, but I think they may leave based on [...] everything I am hearing."<sup>24</sup> Once Obama had strongly come out against Brexit in March 2016, Trump also began talking about the situation more publicly. "I think the migration has been a horrible thing for Europe," he told *Fox News*. "A lot of what was pushed by the EU, I would say that they're better off without it, personally, but I'm not making that as a recommendation. Just my feeling." He wanted them "to make

21 <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/obamas-brexit-plea/479469/> (April 22, 2016) (accessed, Oct. 30, 2018); <http://fortune.com/2016/04/21/obama-london-eu-brexit/> (April 21, 2016) (accessed, Oct. 30, 2018).

22 This was the phrase May used in her speech to the Conservative party conference on 2 October 2016. See [https://www.bbc.com/news/video\\_and\\_audio/headlines/37535867/theresa-may-calls-for-truly-global-britain](https://www.bbc.com/news/video_and_audio/headlines/37535867/theresa-may-calls-for-truly-global-britain) (Oct. 2, 2016) (accessed Oct. 25, 2018).

23 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/donald-trump-brexit-latest-news-eu-referendum-immigration-consequences-us-election-2016-a7105176.html> (June 27, 2016) (accessed, Oct. 31, 2018).

24 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/may/05/donald-trump-brexit-uk-leaving-european-union> (May 5, 2016) (accessed, Oct. 31, 2018).

their own decision." He did not want to give the British any advice "but I know there are a lot of people that are very, very much against being in the EU."<sup>25</sup>

In 2016 most politicians and commentators in the western world were hesitant to recognize the fundamentally disruptive rise of populism as more than a temporary phenomenon. Trump had no such inhibition and recognized perhaps more clearly than others that populism and the discontent that fuelled it would not quickly fade away.<sup>26</sup> The mounting disconnect between ordinary people who had been hit badly by the financial and economic crisis of 2008–2012 was obvious to him. The widespread feeling about the liberal elite being out of touch was not helped by the inclination of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton as well as the incumbent President Obama to surround themselves with rich and famous Hollywood celebrities who professed a "global outlook." Clinton managed to badly misjudge the mood of the country, giving extremely well-paid speeches to Wall Street bankers such as Goldman Sachs and avoiding the rustbelt states of middle America where the problem was most obvious.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps due to shrewd reflection and advice he received from ultra-nationalist film maker and *Breitbart* editor Steve Bannon or perhaps merely because of an instinctive gut feeling (or a mixture of both), Trump realized much more precisely than either Clinton or Obama the underlying reasons for the mounting discontent in America.<sup>28</sup> He also immediately saw that Brexit was "the starkest repudiation yet of the postwar consensus favoring ever-deeper global integration," as Daniel Drezner put it in the *Washington Post*. Instead, "growing protectionism and anti-immigrant sentiment world-wide" could be observed. "Identity politics trumped economics; arguments about 'independence' and 'sovereignty' defeated arguments about British influence and importance."<sup>29</sup> Trump was fully aware of the deep-seated anger and the yearning for change

---

25 Ibid.

26 For a good brief account, see Judis, John B. *The Nationalist Revival: Trade, Immigration, and the Revolt against Globalization* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2018).

27 <https://www.investors.com/politics/editorials/goldman-sachs-paid-hillary-675000-for-this/> (Oct. 17, 2016) (accessed, Oct. 31, 2018); also referred to throughout Woodward, Bob. *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

28 For Bannon's influence on Trump, see Green, Joshua. *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017). See also Laderman, Charlie, and Brendan Simms. *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

29 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/06/24/what-does-brexite-mean-for-the-2016-election/?utm\\_term=.obddbbe46be7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/06/24/what-does-brexite-mean-for-the-2016-election/?utm_term=.obddbbe46be7) (June 24, 2016) (accessed, Oct. 31, 2018). See also Fukuyama, Francis. "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* (Sept./Oct. 2018).

and a better future that Brexit represented. What the referendum had done for Britain, he wanted to bring about with his own election in November. "It'll be Brexit plus plus plus," he kept saying, "Brexit times 10."<sup>30</sup>

Trump certainly felt inspired by the Brexit referendum and his occasional consultation with Nigel Farage confirmed him in his deep conviction that his campaign was on the right track. On the day after the referendum Trump arrived for a two-day trip to his Turnberry golf course and hotel in Scotland. He knew that the world media was focused on Britain at a time when he was falling behind Clinton in the polls. On the day of his arrival, a Friday morning, he gave a rambling and rather bizarre press conference. Responding to a question on Brexit, he immediately declared that "People want their country back. They want to have independence, in a sense, and you see it with Europe, all over Europe." He predicted that "you're going to have, I think many other cases where they want to take their borders back. They want to take their monetary [*sic*] back."<sup>31</sup>

Trump was full of praise for Britain and he predicted a great post-Brexit relationship between the US and the UK. "They'll be great allies, they always have been. And I think zero will change on that score. There has never been a better ally, and I think nothing will change on that score." Indeed, in response to Obama's saying that a post-Brexit Britain would be at the back of the line with regard to the negotiation of a free trade agreement with the US, Trump declared that "the UK has been such a great ally for so long, they'll be always at the front of the queue. They've been amazing allies in good times and in bad times."<sup>32</sup> Trump referred to German Chancellor Angela Merkel's migration policy, which allowed almost one million refugees to enter the country in 2015, as disastrous. According to Trump it had led many Germans, once very proud of their country, to leave and emigrate elsewhere. Therefore, he fully understood

30 <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37922961> (Nov. 10, 2016); <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/brexit-plus-plus-plus/507107/> (Nov. 9, 2016) (accessed, Oct. 31, 2018).

31 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/24/donald-trump-hails-eu-referendum-result-as-he-arrives-in-uk> (June 24, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 2, 2018). Trump's press conference can be found verbatim in the *Washington Post*: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/06/24/donald-trumps-brexit-press-conference-was-beyond-bizarre/?utm\\_term=.fa44dagff9a6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/06/24/donald-trumps-brexit-press-conference-was-beyond-bizarre/?utm_term=.fa44dagff9a6) (June 24, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 1, 2018).

32 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/06/24/donald-trumps-brexit-press-conference-was-beyond-bizarre/?utm\\_term=.fa44dagff9a6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/06/24/donald-trumps-brexit-press-conference-was-beyond-bizarre/?utm_term=.fa44dagff9a6) (June 24, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 1, 2018).



that the British people did not wish to see anything like that occur in their own country and wanted to get rid of any EU influence.<sup>33</sup>

In view of these and similar remarks the British government believed optimistically that they could work with President Trump. However, the two purely bilateral meetings between Prime Minister May and President Trump proved that despite all of his bombastic rhetoric, Trump did not intend to pay particular attention to the "special relationship" at all.

### **The May-Trump Meetings in Washington (January 2017) & London (July 2018)**

Prime Minister May was the first foreign leader who received a formal invitation to visit the White House on 27 January 2017. Others such as Nigel Farage and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had met Trump at Trump Towers in New York after his election, but May was granted the first official visit to the new president. May had high hopes that a meeting with Trump would shore up her precarious domestic position, and initially Trump did not disappoint. He told her, while holding her hand, that Brexit was a "wonderful thing" for Britain and it would be the basis for new trade deals,<sup>34</sup> not realizing that the UK was only entitled to negotiate such deals once it had formally left the EU in March 2019. In a subsequent joint press conference, the new president declared that "Great days lie ahead for our two peoples and our two countries." May was quick to respond that her invitation to be the first foreign leader to visit the White House was clearly "an indication of the strength and importance of the special relationship that exists between our two countries, a relationship based on the bonds of history, of family, kinship and common interests."<sup>35</sup> But during her visit the British delegation came to realize that the UK did not play that much, if any, of a role in Trump's thinking. During the press conference Trump was more focused on opening a new chapter in relations with Russia (perhaps by lifting sanctions) as well as on his controversial Executive Order blocking many travelers from Muslim countries from visiting the U.S.

In fact, shortly before a private meeting with Theresa May commenced, Michael Flynn, Trump's controversial first National Security Adviser, told the president that other leaders such as Russia's Putin had also been interested in

---

33 Ibid.

34 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/27/theresa-may-meets-donald-trump-white-house-live/> (accessed, Nov. 2, 2018).

35 Ibid.

being the first foreign leader to visit him in the White House. Trump became rather agitated and annoyed, repeatedly asking Flynn why he had not told him sooner. Since May and her delegation were in earshot, the embarrassment was extreme. They pretended not to have heard the exchange.<sup>36</sup> All this indicated that Trump was not particularly interested in relations with the UK, Brexit or not. The prime minister still declared afterwards that her visit had reconfirmed both the special relationship and the US commitment to NATO.<sup>37</sup>

May's and Trump's next purely bilateral meeting occurred when Trump visited London in mid-July 2018. It was a highly controversial occasion. His visit was sandwiched between the North Atlantic Council in Brussels on 11–12 July and his first meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki. In Brussels he once again robustly reminded the 28 other leaders that most of them did not contribute two per cent of their GDP to defense, as previously agreed. He hinted at the possibility that the U.S. could well go it alone if the NATO members did not get their act together. In the aftermath of the meeting he also seemed to indicate that he had doubts about the continued viability of Article 5, one of the pillars of the NATO alliance.<sup>38</sup>

Trump did sign the communique in Brussels. It was subsequently reported that his own national security team had insisted on the communique being finalized well before the NATO meeting to ensure that Trump could not interfere in the drafting process.<sup>39</sup> While most western leaders viewed the NATO meeting as difficult, Trump's view was more optimistic. He explained at a press conference: "there's a great, very collegial spirit in that room. Very unified, very strong, no problem." Despite his ever-changing views on the value of NATO, Trump also claimed that "the United States' commitment to NATO is very strong, remains very strong. I believe in NATO."<sup>40</sup> A few days later he referred to the meeting as "very productive."<sup>41</sup>

---

36 <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/07/trump-and-may-special-relationship-dumpster-fire> (July 13, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 2, 2018).

37 For the official remarks at the White House press conference, see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-trump-prime-minister-mays-opening-remarks/> (Jan. 27, 2017).

38 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/09/us/politics/nato-summit-trump.html> (Aug. 9, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 1, 2018).

39 Ibid.

40 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-nato-summit-brussels-belgium/> (July 12, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 1, 2018).

41 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/6766531/trump-may-brexite-us-deal-off/> (July 12, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 2, 2018).

Trump's intention to meet with Putin in Helsinki was viewed by other western leaders with mixed feelings. The poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian intelligence officer, and his daughter Yulia with a Novichok nerve agent (A-234) in Salisbury had occurred in March. Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson claimed publicly that Putin must have known about the attack.<sup>42</sup> Due to opposition from the speaker of the House, the mayor of London and many MPs from both sides of the aisle, Trump's planned state visit to the UK was downgraded to a less formal working visit. After many delays it occurred on 12–13 July 2018. Trump was largely kept away from central London, where huge demonstrations were expected, and met the Queen, members of the royal family and other dignitaries at Windsor Castle. Prime Minister May hosted a black-tie dinner for him at Blenheim Palace, the birth-place of Winston Churchill, whom Trump greatly admired. He had returned a bust of Britain's wartime leader to the Oval Office within weeks of his inauguration, an obvious rebuke of Obama, who had allegedly "downgraded" its significance by placing it outside his private office.

Prior to the Blenheim dinner it emerged that Trump's new National Security Adviser, the ultra-conservative former UN Ambassador John Bolton, had met with hard-line pro-Brexit members of the Conservative Party who were making May's negotiations with the EU difficult. Many of them were openly wondering how much longer the prime minister ought to stay in office. Bolton asked the anti-May faction in her own party how he could be helpful to their cause. According to Anne Applebaum in *The Independent*, some members of Trump's delegation also lobbied the British government on behalf of the imprisoned Tommy Robinson, a violent white supremacist who was one of the co-founders of the ultra-nationalist English Defence League.<sup>43</sup>

If this were not enough, the day before he was hosted by May at Blenheim Palace Trump had given an interview to the mass circulation tabloid *The Sun*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, a Trump family friend. In the interview the U.S. president severely criticized his host, the British prime minister, for mishandling the Brexit negotiations. He said that he would negotiate much "harder" with the EU, including breaking off negotiations if necessary, but that May had ignored his advice and in fact went "the opposite way" with "very unfortunate

---

42 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/03/16/boris-johnson-accuses-putin-ordering-russian-ex-spys-poisoning/431200002/> (March 16, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 1, 2018).

43 <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/trump-uk-visit-anti-us-protests-brexit-theresa-may-president-queen-a8448976.html> (July 16, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 1, 2018).

results" so far.<sup>44</sup> "Well, I think the deal that she is striking is not what the people voted on," he explained. The British economy would remain subject to many European regulations and "then their trade deal with the U.S. will probably not be made." Trump continued: "If they do a deal like that, we would be dealing with the European Union instead of dealing with the UK, so it will probably kill the deal." After all, the U.S. had "enough difficulty with the European Union," he outlined. "We are cracking down right now on the European Union because they have not treated the United States fairly on trading."<sup>45</sup> Although Trump remarked that May was a "nice person" and that he got along "with her nicely," he also strongly praised Boris Johnson, May's arch rival. He "would make a great prime minister," Trump told the newspaper. Without offering any evidence, the president also claimed that Sadiq Kahn, London's Muslim mayor, was weak on fighting crime and terrorism.<sup>46</sup>

Downing Street was stunned by Trump's interview, in the middle of his formal visit to the UK, which clearly supported the anti-May Brexiteers in the Conservative Party. To make up for his *faux-pas* Trump went out of his way to be particularly nice to May at the final joint press conference. He described America's relationship with the UK as "the highest level of special." She "is doing a fantastic job, a great job. And I mean that." When he was asked why he had criticized her in *The Sun*, he simply denied that he had done so, another example of "fake news." Instead, he said, he wanted to "celebrate the special relationship." His country was looking "forward to finalizing a great bilateral trade agreement with the United Kingdom. This is an incredible opportunity for our two countries," he said, "and we will seize it fully." After all, "a strong and independent United Kingdom like a strong and independent United States, is truly a blessing on the world."<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

The British governing elite's intention to strengthen and intensify the UK's relationship with the United States and rejuvenate the "special relationship"

44 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/6766531/trump-may-brexit-us-deal-off/> (July 12, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 2, 2018).

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-may-united-kingdom-joint-press-conference/> (July 13, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 2, 2018).

has proven to be much more difficult than anticipated. Prime Minister May's diplomatic strategy, centered on personal meetings with President Trump, has not resulted in a sense of shared interests. May's inept negotiation strategy with the EU may have contributed to this. The total disarray of her government and her party since mid-2016 has not portrayed Britain as a strong, skillful and influential partner for the U.S. But despite May's desperation to be seen as Trump's favorite European leader, she has not completely given in to Washington. London, for instance, has criticized Washington's withdrawal from the 2016 Paris Climate Change Treaty. Together with France, Germany, China and Russia, the UK also continues to support the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran which Trump withdrew from in May 2018.

It is largely not the British government's fault that a revival of the "special relationship" has not occurred since Donald Trump came to office in January 2017. Despite some positive rhetoric about the continued value of the UK for the United States, Trump does not intend to rely on allies and friends for conducting America's foreign policy. As his slogans "America First" and "make America Great again" indicate, it is all about the U.S. and it is all about him. Trump admitted this quite frankly at an election rally in October 2018: "I am a nationalist," he proudly proclaimed, to thunderous applause.<sup>48</sup> This leaves no space for trusted relationships with other countries, including Britain. Instead Trump has gone out of his way to undermine relations with some of America's long-standing allies such as Germany, and undermine valuable organizations such as the European Union and NATO.<sup>49</sup>

While Trump has not actively attempted to undermine Britain or express much public criticism of Britain's role in world affairs, neither has he done much to help the country. It is most unlikely that a post-Brexit UK will receive any trade breakthroughs from Donald Trump's America. During his press conference with Theresa May in July 2018, he claimed that he "would go in bloody hard" if he were negotiating Brexit. It can be expected that he would do the same should a UK-US free trade agreement (or any other agreement, including on security) be negotiated with Britain. Although *Guardian* journalist Jonathan Freedland recommended that "in the age of Trump, it's time to ditch the special relationship,"<sup>50</sup> this will be difficult to do. After having abandoned

---

48 <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-nationalist-texas-rally-1182223> (Oct. 22, 2018) (accessed, Nov. 3, 2018).

49 See for instance Larres, Klaus. "Angela Merkel and Donald Trump: Values, Interests, and the Future of the West." *German Politics* 27 (2) (2018), 193–213.

50 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/01/donald-trump-theresa-may-special-relationship-hate-filled-tweets> (Dec. 1, 2017) (accessed, Nov. 2, 2018).

the EU, where is Britain supposed to go for support and assistance if not to the U.S.? After all, next to Britain's permanent seat on the UN Security Council, it is the close intelligence and military cooperation with the U.S., and America's interests in the financial center of the City, that raises Britain above the rest in global politics. There is not much else left. This, of course, puts the UK very much at the mercy of Washington. In the age of Trump this is not a good position to be in.