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Analysing the “Special Relationship” Between the United States and Great Britain: The Suez Crisis, The Nassau Negotiation, and the Role of Mythologising in Alliances

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ABSTRACT

The “Special Relationship” is a characterisation of relations between the United Kingdom and the United States, yet the extent to which it exists has been hugely debated. This thesis investigates the nature of that relationship, and tries to understand how special it actually is. In particular, this thesis will determine why the “Special Relationship” has stood the test of time. I focus on two particular case studies: the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956, showing how the alliance was ruptured on moral and imperial grounds, and the Polaris Pact of 1962, showing how it was restored on a civilisational basis. Where Suez tore the alliance; the Polaris agreement at Nassau stitched it back up. What is fascinating is that the “Special Relationship” survives episodes not by way of conventional alliance theory, but through the act of mythmaking. Therefore, the analytical approach adopted to study the relationship in this thesis is that of mythologisation, specifically, through Roland Barthes’s conception of myth. The conclusion is that the “Special Relationship” does exist, but on a symbolic and mythological level, and the reason that it has been sustained is because it functions in this flexible way.

Die „Special Relationship“ charakterisiert die Beziehung zwischen dem Vereinigten Königreich und den Vereinigten Staaten, doch ihr tatsächliches Ausmaß ist weit umstritten. Diese Arbeit untersucht das Wesen dieser Beziehung und versucht zu ergründen, wie besonders sie tatsächlich ist. Insbesondere wird sie klären, warum diese „Special Relationship“ die Zeit überdauert hat. Ich konzentriere mich auf zwei bestimmte Fallstudien: die Suezkrise von 1956, die den Bruch des Bündnisses aus moralischen und imperialistischen Gründen aufzeigt, und die Vereinbarung von Nassau von 1962, die seine Wiederherstellung auf zivilisatorischer Ebene verdeutlicht. Wo Suez das Bündnis zerriss, flickte die Vereinbarung von Nassau es wieder zusammen. Faszinierend ist, dass die „Special Relationship“ Krisen nicht im Sinne der klassischen Allianztheorie überdauert, sondern durch Mythologisierung. Daher wurde in dieser Arbeit zur Erforschung des Bündnisses der analytische Ansatz der Mythologisierung, insbesondere Roland Barthes’ Konzept des Mythos, übernommen. Die Schlussfolgerung lautet, dass die „Special Relationship“ zwar existiert, aber auf einer symbolischen und mythologischen Ebene, und dass sie deshalb fortbesteht, weil sie auf dieser flexiblen Metaebene fungiert.

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Introduction

When one hears the term “Special Relationship”, a matter of different relationships come to mind. To British Ambassador Sir Christian Turner, the “real ‘Special Relationship’” means the United States and “probably Israel”.¹ To some, it means the post-war relationship between France and Germany.² To the large majority of Britons and, less so, Americans, it means the alliance between the United States and the United Kingdom, founded in the dark days of the Second World War. From Prime Winston Churchill and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and Tony Blair, to Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, each generation has had a pair of leaders that have been installed into the iconography of the “Special Relationship”. Personal diplomacy makes the relationship distinct, but as does the institution-sharing between the two nations. Successive leaders of the respective nations have made it a priority in their policymaking to maintain close relations with one other. Unprecedented nuclear cooperation, intelligence sharing, and previous military integration also give the alliance its “special” nature. Yet the existence of the “Special Relationship” is remarkably contested, both in scholarship and general attitudes. Sir Christian Turner’s remarks are not an isolated view. The consensus is often that Britain needs American far more than America needs Britain. Can it really then be “special”? If most Americans have never even heard of the term “Special Relationship”, does it really exist?

The alliance between the United States and the United Kingdom has experienced a fair share of turbulence. The Suez Crisis of 1956, which this thesis will discuss in detail, is one example. The fallout of the Iraq War, which Prime Minister Tony Blair and his counterpart President George W. Bush spearheaded in 2003, caused a cooling of the relationship with the succeeding President Barack Obama. As recently as March 2026, President Donald Trump was on record to state that the

¹ ‘US Special Relationship Is “Probably Israel”, Says UK Ambassador’, 28 April 2026.

² Francesca Vassallo, ‘France and Germany Fifty Years after the Élysée Treaty’, *German Politics and Society*, *German Politics and Society* 31, no. 1 (2013): v.

“[Special Relationship] is not what it was.”³ Not only this, but according to American public opinion, the relationship is less special than ever.⁴ Yet... it still exists in public discourse, and has influence over major policy decisions of either country. As recently as last year, the UK held the most “privileged position” with the United States during President Trump’s tariff blitz, with only 10% tariffs instead of the standard 15%.⁵ Prime Minister Keir Starmer was singularly under enormous pressure to support the United States after President Trump’s strikes on Iran.⁶ Through all of its highs and lows, its turbulence and its harmony, the “Special Relationship” lives to fight another day. But why?

The relationship technically has a founding treaty in the Atlantic Charter, but this is not a document which signifies political bilateral commitment, such as with the Treaty of Windsor and the Anglo-Portuguese alliance.⁷ (That alliance is now but a historic footnote.) While the states of this “Special Relationship” do share some institutions, it is not a binding military alliance such as NATO with a definitive Article 5. In fact, the “Special Relationship” has often eluded definition. If it can only be loosely defined as an alliance between two nations, whose strategic interests sometimes diverge, then according to traditional Alliance Theory it should not have necessarily survived.⁸ This is why, in order to define the alliance, understand it, and answer the question of why it has been able to survive so long, we need to look beyond alliance theory. The forging of the alliance occurred in the depths of the Second World War, when the world faced an existential threat. Successive generations have quoted Churchill and reminisced about his camaraderie with President Roosevelt. The meeting in Placentia Bay is the stuff of legend. It is exactly

³ Oliver Wright Editor Policy, *Special Relationship ‘Not What It Was’, as Trump Rebukes PM on Iran*, The Times.

⁴ ‘Perceived Importance of US-UK Alliance Declining Among Young Americans, Survey Finds’, Association of Marshall Scholars, 2026.

⁵ Phillip Inman et al., ‘UK “Working with US” to Analyse Impact of Supreme Court’s Ruling against Tariffs’, Politics, *The Guardian*, 20 February 2026.

⁶ Rowena Mason, ‘Starmer Faces Greater Quandary over “Special Relationship” after Iran Attack’, Politics, *The Guardian*, 1 March 2026.

⁷ Clyde L. Grose, ‘The Anglo-Portuguese Marriage of 1662’, *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 10, no. 3 (1930): 313–52.

⁸ See Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (1948), a realist text that states the alliances are instruments of national interest. See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (1979), a structural realist text which posits that states balance against power. See Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, which posits that states balance against threat. These texts do not account for personal diplomacy, kinship, or myth.

at this elevated level that we should meet the alliance: the “Special Relationship” has acquired mythic status. Therefore, it should be analysed as such—a myth.

This is not to say myth in the sense of Ancient Greek Mythology, though Churchill and Roosevelt did undertake a Sisyphean task. It is myth in the sense of Roland Barthes’s myth, where, through cultural and semiological theory, first-order historic events are elevated to second-order signifiers: put plainly, “turning history into nature”.⁹ The “Special Relationship” is just that. A wartime alliance between two nations that has become a naturalised, transcendent relationship between two nations. Two minds that think alike. Two states that undertook the mission to lead a peaceful and liberal post-war world order. Brothers-in-arms, the cornerstone of the English-Speaking Peoples, etc. This thesis will argue that it is acquiring mythological status that has made the “Special Relationship” unique, and weather the storm of time.

This thesis asks the question: what is the role of mythologising in alliances? And in doing so, it asks: what role does mythologising have in making the relationship “special”, and what role does myth play in sustaining the “Special Relationship” through its ruptures and estrangements?

Using Roland Barthes’s concept of myth, I have identified three dimensions to the mythology of the “Special Relationship”. Moral, civilisational, and imperial-historical. These three aspects of the myth will be used to analyse the construction of the “Special Relationship” myth, one instance where the myth was ruptured, and one instance where it was repaired.

A. The Three Mythological Themes

This thesis argues for the case that the mythological nature of the “Special Relationship” is the reason for both its durability and its flexibility; that the role of mythology in alliances is to absorb conflict and material imbalance and disguise it behind a greater meaning and purpose. To unpack the dimensions to the mythology of the Special Relationship, to understand how this relationship is configured as “special” and thereby analyse its permanence, Roland Barthes’s concept of myth is utilised. In order to narrow down to just three dimensions of the myth, I consulted

⁹ Barthes, *Mythologies* 128.

scholarship and chronologised the relationship¹⁰ between the United States and the United Kingdom. From scholarship, I derived different views of the “Special Relationship” and organised them by similarity, finalising the three mythological lenses through Barthes’s framework.¹¹

Roland Barthes argues in ‘Mythologies’ that myth operates as a second-order semiological system.¹² Myth takes a first-order historical sign, such as a real event, or a concrete relationship, and transforms it into a signifier for something more abstract and more natural. When applied to the Anglo-American relationship, the wartime cooperation between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill constitutes the first-order historical sign. The Destroyers-for-Bases Agreement, the Lend-Lease Act, the Atlantic Charter, the Combined Chiefs of Staff are all real events that were driven by strategic calculation and material necessity. What the myth required was that these contingent, interest-driven arrangements be elevated into the second-order signifier of civilisational unity, shared destiny, and natural kinship. It is Winston Churchill who primarily drives this transformation through his strong, elevated, persuasive rhetoric. If the “Special Relationship” is a monument, Churchill is its chief architect. He undertakes what Barthes coined as the transformation of “history into nature”.¹³

i. Civilisational: “English-Speaking Peoples”

The elements that have constructed and sustained the “Special Relationship” myth are threefold. Civilisational, moral, and imperial-historical. The civilisational dimension of the “Special Relationship” myth rests on the proposition that Britain and the United States share not merely common interests or institutional arrangements, but a common racial and political identity rooted in language, legal tradition, and constitutional heritage. This identity was denominated by Churchill as the “English-Speaking Peoples”.¹⁴ Churchill started writing his four-volumes of ‘A History of the English-Speaking Peoples (1956-1958)’ in the 1930s and completed

¹⁰ See Appendix B, Chronologies. I coded each key moment in the relationship, ranging from “battle” to “trade dispute” to “treaty”. Even when the two states were in their “Not-So-Special” period, for example, trade disputes were settled in arbitration, significant for legal tradition and the civilisational dimension. Each framework emerged as a recurring discursive register across multiple moments in the timeline.

¹¹ See Appendix A, 3b.

¹² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Vintage, 1993), 113.

¹³ Barthes, *Mythologies* 128.

¹⁴ Ibid.

them after his retirement from politics. These volumes are the literary monument of this theme. They define the English-speaking peoples as those “inhabitants of the British Isles and to those independent nations who derive their beginnings, their speech, and many of their institutions from England, and who now preserve, nourish, and develop them in their own ways,”¹⁵ and narrate their history as the progressive realisation of a constitutional tradition.

It was not only Churchill and the British who valued the idea of the “English-Speaking Peoples”. The idea that there exists a kinship between the United Kingdom and the United States, based on race and common culture, was equally appealing to Americans.¹⁶ Stuart Anderson states that Anglo-Saxonism functioned as a “self-conscious bond connecting Britons and Americans”¹⁷ even before the war, when relations between the two nations were cool. Anglo-Saxonism was consolidated across imperial frontiers and at points of elite Anglo-American social and intellectual relations. American figures such as Theodore Roosevelt drew on the vocabulary of racial kinship and shared civilisational destiny in using the term “the English-speaking race”.¹⁸ Paul Kramer shows that transatlantic Anglo-Saxonism was sustained by American publishing networks, such as ‘The Atlantic Monthly’, ‘The North American Review’, and ‘The Fortnightly Review’, which circulated intellectual connections between British and American elites.¹⁹ Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain’s 1898 Birmingham address, hailing the United States as “a powerful and generous nation, speaking our language, bred of our race,”²⁰ was received with great enthusiasm by the ‘Chicago Tribune’ as evidence that “the two great branches of the Anglo-Saxon race are drawing nearer and nearer together.”²¹

This civilisational rhetoric is further solidified in various speeches and writings during and after the war. Dwight D. Eisenhower’s December 1943 directive

¹⁵ Winston Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples. Vol. 1, The Birth of Britain*, (New York : Barnes & Noble, 2005), xxii.

¹⁶ William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay, 1941-1945: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 6.

¹⁷ Stuart Anderson, *Race and Rapprochement: Anglo-Saxonism and Anglo-American Relations, 1895-1904* (Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1981), 23.

¹⁸ Paul A. Kramer, ‘Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule between the British and United States Empires, 1880-1910’, *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (2002): 1325.

¹⁹ Ibid, 1326.

²⁰ Thomas F. Gossett, *Race : The History of an Idea in America*, (New York : Oxford University Press, 1997), 324.

²¹ Kramer, ‘Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons’, 1334.

framing the European campaign as a mission to “preserve our civilisation”,²² alongside the Monuments Men program it helped inspire, imbued military doctrine with Anglo-American cultural unity. The Atlantic Charter that is co-authored by Roosevelt and Churchill is rife with civilisational language. Furthermore, Churchill’s civilisational rhetoric dates back to before the war. In his Liberty Day Meeting on 4 July 1918, he already frames the Declaration of Independence as “not only an American document. It follows on Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights as the third great title-deed on which the liberties of the English-Speaking Peoples are founded.”²³

At Harvard in September 1943, Churchill explicitly articulated the civilisational framing. “Law, language, literature—these are considerable factors. Common conceptions of what is right and decent, a marked regard for fair play, especially to the weak and poor, a stern sentiment of impartial justice, and above all the love of personal freedom [...] these are common conceptions on both-sides of the ocean among the English-Speaking Peoples.”²⁴ The myth here performs the operation Barthes identified. It presents as timeless and natural what is in fact historically constructed and politically contingent: a selective reading of the Anglo-American past designed to naturalise a specific diplomatic project. The mythological operation required the suppression of inconvenient counter-narratives: the century of commercial rivalry, the War of 1812, the violent hostility of Irish-American political culture, and the structural differences between British parliamentary sovereignty and American constitutional republicanism. Not to mention, the American Revolution and War of Independence in the first place.

ii. Moral: The Democratic Mission

The Second World War provided conditions uniquely suited to the construction of a moral narrative framing Anglo-American cooperation as a joint struggle for democracy, freedom, and the liberal international order. The Atlantic Charter’s language, which will be analysed in the first chapter, established a moral framework for the alliance before the United States had entered the war. Churchill’s congressional rhetoric consistently elevated cooperation to the level of providential

²² Dwight D. Eisenhower, ‘Cable from General Marshall to General Eisenhower Regarding Protection of Artistic and Historic Monuments in Italy’, October 14, 1943.

²³ ‘Churchill on the 4th of July’, *The Churchill Project - Hillsdale College*, 4 July 1918.

²⁴ ‘The Price of Greatness’, *International Churchill Society*, 29 August 2008.

purpose. Addressing the joint session of Congress on 26 December 1941, he declared that “he must indeed have a blind soul who cannot see that some great purpose and design is being worked out here below of which we have the honour to be the faithful servants,”²⁵ purposefully invoking “the Gettysburg ideal of government of the people, by the people, for the people”²⁶ as a touchstone equally applicable to the British parliamentary tradition. The implications were that the two nations were engaged in the joint guardianship of a shared moral civilisation.

His Address to Congress sets out the moral position that Britain and America should, and will, define themselves by throughout the war and after its completion. Churchill draws the US and UK “together, now that we are linked in a *righteous comradeship* of arms, now that our two considerable nations, each in *perfect unity*, have joined all their life energies in a *common resolve*, a new scene opens upon which a steady light will glow and brighten.”²⁷ The moral narrative elevated Britain to co-equal status as a moral partner even as its material capacity for independent action steadily declined.

Yet this moral framing did not originate in 1941. A pre-existing pool of Anglo-American ideological kinship was available to be drawn upon. Anderson demonstrates that by the turn of the twentieth century Britons and Americans had long persuaded themselves that it was their duty to “preserve and extend the area of freedom, establish peace and open up new roads to human happiness”²⁸ a conviction rooted in the shared belief that representative democracy, as practised in Great Britain and the United States, was uniquely above other forms of governance. Henry Cabot Lodge had articulated this as early as 1895, observing that “representative government has been a full success only among the English-speaking people of the world.”²⁹ What the Second World War provided was the existential conditions under which this could be elevated from a racial-imperial ideology into a universal democratic mission.³⁰

²⁵ ‘Winston Churchill’s Address to Congress Speech’, December 26, 1941.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

²⁸ Anderson, *Race and Rapprochement*, 24-25.

²⁹ Ibid, 23.

³⁰ In this way, one can see how the three dimensions of the myth bleed into one another, primarily drawing upon the civilisational dimension. Anglo-Saxon governing and legal tradition provides the basis for the moral mission, while Anglo-Saxon intellectual and social elitism gave rationale for imperialistic expansionism.

As International Relations scholars Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle have argued, the concept of strategic narratives function simultaneously at three levels. They operate as system narratives (how the world is structured), identity narratives (who “we” are), and issue narratives (why specific actions are required).³¹ The moral framing of the “Special Relationship” operated at all three: as a system narrative, it positioned the Anglo-American alliance as the guarantor of a liberal international order against totalitarian aggression; as an identity narrative, it constituted Britain and the United States as uniquely virtuous democracies defined by their shared values; and as an issue narrative, it justified specific policy choices such as military intervention, nuclear cooperation, and intelligence sharing as expressions of moral obligation rather than strategic interest.

The policy of “unconditional surrender”, announced at the Casablanca Conference of January 1943 by Roosevelt and Churchill,³² elevated the war’s military objective to the level of moral principle. Unconditional surrender framed the Axis powers as illegitimate states whose total elimination was a moral necessity. It moralised the enemy. Roosevelt adopted this phrase without prior consultation with Churchill, yet Churchill endorsed it.³³ The moral narrative was thus also a vehicle of British diplomatic accommodation to American power. The myth of shared moral purpose concealed a structure in which American interests defined the agenda.

iii. *Imperial-Historical: The Logic of Inheritance*

The imperial-historical dimension of the “Special Relationship” myth, much like the civilisational dimension, rests on a selective reading of the Anglo-American past that positions the American assumption of global leadership as the successor to British power. It is figured as an orderly transfer of responsibility from an exhausted empire to its vigorous democratic heir. This frame is largely founded on Harold Macmillan’s remark to Richard Crossman in 1943: “We, my dear Crossman, are Greeks in this American Empire. You will find the Americans much as the Greeks found the Romans — great big, vulgar, bustling people, more vigorous than we are

³¹ Alister Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Routledge, 2014), 5.

³² United States State Department, ‘Casablanca: Transcript of Press Conference’, Office of the Historian, 24 January 1943.

³³ Drew Middleton, *Retreat from Victory; a Critical Appraisal of American Foreign and Military Policy from 1920 to the 1970s*, with Internet Archive (New York, Hawthorn Books, 1973), <http://archive.org/details/retreatfromvicto00midd>.

and also more idle [...] We must run Allied Forces Headquarters as the Greek slaves ran the operations of the Emperor Claudius.”³⁴ Macmillan’s metaphor, the Greeks guiding Romans, figured British subordination as a form of civilised stewardship. The Americans had the power, but the British had the wisdom. The “wisdom guiding power” narrative was a mythological operation, transforming dependent junior partnership into cultural superiority.

Christopher Hitchens regards this as a self-serving myth.³⁵ In his view, Britain had been Rome, not Greece. It had been the imperial hegemon, not the subordinate civilisation of superior culture. However, for the purpose of this thesis, the Greece-Rome idiom is taken at its word. It is not the truth behind the myth that shapes the “Special Relationship”, but the belief in the myth. As Hitchens himself concedes, what that belief concealed is that “Post-imperial Britain, during the arduous and sometimes embarrassing process of becoming post-imperial, leaned very decidedly toward the United States. Not without rancour, it appointed the United States its successor. Not without quibbling and reservation, the United States took up the succession.”³⁶ Peter Clarke’s argument in ‘The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire’ is more structural. The combination of Lend-Lease and the Atlantic Charter had ensured that the price of American wartime assistance was the progressive dismantlement of the British Empire. This was a process that the “inheritance” narrative rendered as voluntary and orderly succession.³⁷ Scholars such as Bradford Perkins³⁸ and Kathleen Burk³⁹, surveying the longer arc of Anglo-American relations, demonstrate that the characterisation of the United States as Britain’s natural heir rests on radically compressed historical memory: for most of the preceding century, the two countries had been rivals and periodic adversaries, and the “special” warmth of the relationship was, by 1939, barely two generations old.⁴⁰ The mythological operation required the retrospective extension of this recent warmth across the entire sweep of Anglo-American history.

³⁴ Anthony Sampson, *Macmillan: A Study in Ambiguity* (A&C Black, 2012), 61.

³⁵ Ibid, 47.

³⁶ Hitchens, *Blood, Class, and Empire*, 31.

³⁷ Peter Clarke, "The Costs of Victory" in *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire: Churchill, Roosevelt, and the Birth of the Pax Americana* (Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 392-424.

³⁸ Bradford Perkins, *The Great Rapprochement* (New York : Atheneum, 1968).

³⁹ Burk, *Old World, New World: Great Britain and America from the Beginning*.

⁴⁰ Burk, *Old World, New World: Great Britain and America from the Beginning*.

The dimensions to American anti-imperialism complicated the imperial-historical narrative considerably. Roosevelt's sustained pressure on Churchill regarding India and the British Empire,⁴¹ and his insistence that the Atlantic Charter's self-determination clause applied universally⁴² reflected a deep strand of American political culture that identified British imperialism as an obstacle to the liberal post-war order. Yet, this stance was not without contradictions. Churchill viewed American trusteeship schemes as "merely a cloak for American expansion".⁴³ British officials in the Colonial Office noted that the language of trusteeship, especially in the Pacific, functioned as an ideological cover for the extension of American strategic interests, at the same time observing a "smearing campaign" against the Empire.⁴⁴ In 1947, M. J. Bonn argued that the Americans were both the creators of a "modern Anti-Imperialism" and the founders of an informal "mighty Empire".⁴⁵ "Imperialism", was replaced by "trusteeship".⁴⁶ Scholars argue that American global leadership was recast as liberal, democratic stewardship, the continuation of the Anglo-Saxon civilising mission in a post-colonial idiom.⁴⁷ The United States did not replace the British Empire, it inherited its moral purpose while disavowing its methods. The British accepted this mythology because the alternative was worse. To contest the narrative of voluntary succession was to risk America's cooperation. The myth therefore functioned to both legitimise American neo-imperial interests while obscuring their imperial nature, and to lend dignity to what was, in reality, a humiliating British abdication.

*B. "But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."*⁴⁸

These three mythological dimensions are the foundation for how this thesis will analyse episodes of the "Special Relationship". In Chapter I, wartime

⁴¹ William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay, 1941-1945: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 4, 9.

⁴² *Ibid*, 121-134.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 550.

⁴⁵ M. J. Bonn, 'The U.S.A. & British Imperialism', *The Political Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1947): 61-70.

⁴⁶ Mark Bradley, 'Franklin Roosevelt, Trusteeship and US Exceptionalism: Reconsidering the American Vision of Postcolonial Vietnam', in *A Companion to the Vietnam War* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2006).

⁴⁷ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴⁸ 'From the Archive: Mr. Churchill on Our One Aim', From the Guardian, *The Guardian*, Originally published on 11 November 1942.

cooperation constructs the myth. In Chapter II, a wrecking ball is taken to the building with Suez. The myth is violated on two counts, the moral and the imperial-historical. And in the final chapter, the relationship is scaffolded and restored with the Nassau Agreement. The two episodes were chosen because they most starkly illuminate how the myth operates: one as rupture, one as repair. These episodes are the key to understanding the “Special Relationship”, and why it has endured, as they are the decisive tests that the alliance has overcome. Through the Second World War, Suez, and Nassau, this thesis will determine that the “Special Relationship” is truly “special”.

Chapter I: Brave New World (1938-1949)

We begin with the Second World War, the crucible in which the “Special Relationship” was forged. Our heroes are Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, architects of the “Special Relationship”. We move through canonical events that are essential to understanding Suez and Nassau.

A. The Wartime Alliance (1938-1945)

i. *The Not-So-Special Nineteenth Century*

Though the term “Special Relationship” has been a mainstay in the politics concerning the United States and the United Kingdom since the Second World War, this unity was once animosity. The century that preceded the Second World War was characterised as much by rivalry as by partnership. Trade disputes, boundary conflicts, competing imperial interests, and residual revolutionary antagonism had defined relations between Britain and the United States from independence through to the interwar period.⁴⁹ “The Great Rapprochement” of 1895-1915 provided a partial exception with a period of strategic convergence in which Britain ceded points of conflict with the United States in exchange for American goodwill. Bradford Perkins cites a “vaguely shared angle of vision” of the two nations as “bastions of parliamentarianism in a world troubled by autocracy”, a precursor to the moral dimension of the “Special Relationship” myth without yet possessing its rhetorical or institutional elaboration.⁵⁰ However, the rapprochement was followed by a period of estrangement during the 1920s and 1930s, defined by American isolationism,⁵¹ British appeasement, and transatlantic economic conflict.⁵² The relationship entered the 1930s in a condition of mutual suspicion, embodied by Franklin Roosevelt’s and Neville Chamberlain’s distrust of one another.⁵³ What the Second World War provided were the circumstances under which the relations

⁴⁹ Kathleen Burk, *Old World, New World: Great Britain and America from the Beginning* (Grove Press, 2009), 190.

⁵⁰ Bradford Perkins, *The Great Rapprochement* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 8.

⁵¹ H. C. (Harry Cranbrook) Allen, *Great Britain and the United States: A History of Anglo- American Relations (1783-1952)* (New York : St. Martin’s Press, 1955), 724-.

⁵² David Dimbleby, *An Ocean Apart*, (Random House, 1988),.

⁵³ David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937-41: A Study in Competitive Co-Operation* (London : Europa Publications, 1981), 25.

between the nations could be transformed into a more durable alliance: an existential threat, the British need for a strategic alliance,⁵⁴ and an established understanding of how the two nations were culturally, linguistically, and politically linked. The mythology that subsequently enshrined the relationship as a partnership of equals and civilisational kinsmen required deliberate construction. This chapter examines how this construction was accomplished, by whom, and through what rhetorical and institutional mechanisms.

ii. *Destroyers-for-Bases*⁵⁵

Britain's urgent appeal for American assistance in 1940 was the first major event to frame the mythological rhetoric. When Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940 and cabled Roosevelt requesting "the loan of forty of fifty of your older destroyers"⁵⁶, his request was largely transactional. Churchill urged Roosevelt only to "proclaim non-belligerency", which would mean material support to the Allies but effective neutrality. The Destroyers-for-Bases Agreement of 2 September 1940 exchanged fifty ageing American destroyers for ninety-nine-year leases on eight British naval and air bases across the Western Hemisphere.⁵⁷ It was a transaction of unambiguous benefit to the United States as they secured strategic real estate in the Atlantic and Caribbean in exchange for naval assets of questionable operational value. To domestic publics, the deal was downplayed to affirm the United States's non-belligerency. Roosevelt stated that it was "not inconsistent with our status of peace" and that it was an "exercise of sovereign right"⁵⁸. Churchill similarly downplayed it in his House of Commons address, citing "mutual assistance rendered to one another by two friendly nations [...] only ignorant persons would suggest [this affects] the non-belligerency of the United States."⁵⁹ It is only later, in his memoirs, that Churchill endows this event with great significance, and "brought the United

⁵⁴ Ritchie Ovendale, *'Appeasement' and the English Speaking World: Britain, the United States, the Dominions, and the Policy of 'Appeasement' 1937-1939*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975), 20.

⁵⁵ See Appendix F, Figure 4 for a picture of one of the Destroyers.

⁵⁶ Warren F. Kimball, *Churchill and Roosevelt, Volume 1: The Complete Correspondence: Alliance Emerging, October 1933–November 1942*, Churchill & Roosevelt (Princeton University Press, 1987), 37.

⁵⁷ Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937-41*, 131.

⁵⁸ 'Message to Congress on Exchanging Destroyers for British Naval and Air Bases.', accessed 16 April 2026.

⁵⁹ 'War Situation.' (Hansard, 5 September 1940)'.

States definitely nearer to us”.⁶⁰ Notably, Churchill tends to generally attach greater meaning and rhetorical flourish to the wartime cooperation with hindsight, a Barthesian act in itself. This event is retrospectively elevated to a greater extent, as an indicator that the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom is naturalised and was destined to be.

iii. Lend-Lease

The Lend-Lease Act of March 1941 was next to deepen Britain’s material dependency on the United States while intensifying the rhetoric of partnership. Churchill’s letter of December 1940 warned Roosevelt that “the moment approaches when we shall no longer be able to pay [...] for shipping and other supplies.”⁶¹ Crucially, this was framed as “a statement of the minimum action necessary to the achievement of *our common purpose*.”⁶² Here, Churchill starts to embellish events and transactions with a deeper meaning, made possible through the existential conditions of the war and the dire state that Britain was in. Actions start to be imbued with a morality, transactions with a greater weight. What was essentially a declaration of British insolvency was recast as a joint strategic commitment. Churchill invokes the civilisational narrative, arguing that after “the victory won” and “civilisation saved”, it would be advantageous for the “Western Hemisphere” to be economically salvaged. However, Roosevelt’s response was to domesticate the transaction through metaphor. “Suppose my neighbour’s home catches fire, and I have a length of garden hose... I want my garden hose back after the fire is over.”⁶³ Churchill’s subsequent description of Lend-Lease as “the most unsordid act in history,”⁶⁴ completed the mythological circuit: a transaction worth \$27 billion in material to the United Kingdom,⁶⁵ extracting in return a British commitment to America’s vision of the post-war economic order, was elevated into a gesture of pure

⁶⁰ Winston S. Churchill, ‘The Second World War: Their Finest Hour’, in *The Second World War: Their Finest Hour*, 1st edn, II, ed. Winston S. Churchill (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), 358.

⁶¹ Winston Churchill, ‘The British Prime Minister (Churchill) to President Roosevelt’, 7 December 1940.

⁶² Ibid. Emphasis mine.

⁶³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, ‘Press Conference’, The American Presidency Project, UC Santa Barbara, 17 October 1940.

⁶⁴ ‘SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER CHURCHILL AT THE MANSION HOUSE REGARDING INVOLVEMENT IN A US-JAPANESE WAR BY THE BRITISH’, accessed 16 April 2026.

⁶⁵ Alan P. Dobson, *US Wartime Aid to Britain, 1940-1946* (St. Martin’s Press, 1986). Using the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this sum is valued at \$480 billion today.

moral generosity. David Reynolds's judgement is that historians have often appropriated Churchill's compelling rhetoric, which was primarily used for the purposes of wartime diplomacy and propaganda, as the sober language of historical description.⁶⁶ Roosevelt's garden hose metaphor is an example of details often ignored in historical accounts of such events. Though Lend-Lease was passed,⁶⁷ and cited as "unsordid", it was not without its conditionality.

iv. Interpersonal Diplomacy

The personal diplomacy of Churchill and Roosevelt was itself a primary vehicle of mythological production. Over the course of the war, the two leaders exchanged more than 1,700 messages,⁶⁸ which was an unprecedented volume of high-level correspondence that created a sustained textual record of intimacy and partnership. Roosevelt opened their exchange on 11 September 1939, eight days after Britain's declaration of war, with a conspicuously informal register. "My dear Churchill [...] I want you to know how glad I am that you are back again in the Admiralty [...] I shall at all times welcome it if you will keep me in touch personally with anything you want me to know about."⁶⁹ Churchill adopted the codename "Former Naval Person" in his subsequent messages.⁷⁰ As Roosevelt had been US Assistant Secretary of the Navy, and Churchill former First Lord of the Admiralty,⁷¹ this nickname reinforced the impression of a relationship conducted across a fraternal axis. In January 1941, Roosevelt sent Churchill a handwritten message from Longfellow: "Sail on, O Ship of State! / Sail on, O Union, strong and great! / Humanity with all its fears, / With all the hopes of future years, / Is hanging breathless on thy fate". He added, "I think this verse applies to *you people* as it does to *us*."⁷² Churchill took to the radio and read the verse to the British public, declaring "Here is the answer which I will give to President Roosevelt: Put your confidence in

⁶⁶ Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937-41*, 166.

⁶⁷ See Appendix F, Figure 5 for a visual of Roosevelt signing Lend-Lease.

⁶⁸ Francis L. Loewenheim, et al, *Roosevelt and Churchill, Their Secret Wartime Correspondence*, (New York, Saturday Review Press, 1975), xv.

⁶⁹ Kimball, *Churchill and Roosevelt, Volume 1*, 24.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 26.

⁷¹ Jon Meacham, *Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship* (Random House Publishing Group, 2003), 6.

⁷² Jon Meacham, *Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship*, (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004), 93, 104. Emphasis mine.

us.”⁷³ Such gestures circulated in memoir and biography, in both the public and the private sphere, contributing to a narrative of extraordinary personal affinity that biographers such as Joseph Lash have treated as constitutive of the alliance’s very character.⁷⁴ Reynolds, by contrast, demonstrated that the personal relationship masked a sustained pattern of divergent interest, that Churchill deliberately constructed a myth about the Anglo-American wartime alliance as the “natural expression of an underlying cultural unity” when the relationship was in fact driven by strategic calculation and the management of British decline. As figureheads of their respective states, Churchill and Roosevelt’s familiarity served as a microcosm of the myth of the “Special Relationship” itself. Through a civilisational lens, their correspondence and personal chemistry were proof of a deeper kinship, two English-speaking statesmen governing two English-speaking peoples, their affinity naturalising the alliance itself.⁷⁵

v. *Wartime Institutional Architecture*

Through the initial transactions such as Destroyers-for-Bases or Lend-Lease, UK-US cooperation was largely transactional and not without conditionality. Churchill and Roosevelt’s correspondence added personal flair to the alliance between the two countries, but it was not until US entry into the war that the wartime alliance became institutionalised and given lasting form. The Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS), established during the Arcadia Conference on 14 January 1942, integrated British and American military planning into a single joint command.⁷⁶ Its success owed much to Field Marshal Sir John Dill, the senior British representative in Washington, whose relationship with General Marshall transformed what might have been a merely formal structure into a genuinely functioning alliance.⁷⁷ The CCS was an act without precedent in the history of sovereign states.⁷⁸

⁷³ Ibid, 105.

⁷⁴ Joseph P. Lash, *Roosevelt and Churchill, 1939-1941: The Partnership That Saved the West*, (New York: Norton, 1976).

⁷⁵ See Appendix F, Figure 6 and 7 for a visual of Roosevelt and Churchill’s camaraderie.

⁷⁶ U.S Chiefs of Staff, ‘Memorandum by the United States Chiefs of Staff’, 14 January 1942.

⁷⁷ Alex Danchev, ‘A Special Relationship: Field Marshal Sir John Dill and General George C. Marshall’, *RUSI* (London, United Kingdom) 130, no. 2 (1985): 56–61.

⁷⁸ Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: The Military Geniuses Who Led the West to Victory in World War II*, (London: Penguin, 2009), 67.

Intelligence sharing deepened in parallel. The BRUSA Agreement of May 1943, which formalised the exchange of signals intelligence between Britain's Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park and the American War Department, created the institutional precursor of what would become the Five Eyes network.⁷⁹ These structures provided the myth with a material foundation; evidence of "specialness" that was, in institutional terms, genuinely unprecedented. Yet they also encoded the asymmetry the myth was designed to conceal. It was American strategic priorities that increasingly shaped the alliance's direction as the war progressed, a dominance which was both foreseen and feared by the British with the Combined Chiefs of Staff.⁸⁰

vi. *Asymmetry Apparent*

As cooperation deepened, so the asymmetry of each nation's capabilities became discernible. The Tehran Conference of November-December 1943 made the underlying asymmetry visible in ways that Churchill found deeply disturbing. Meeting Stalin for the first time alongside Roosevelt, Churchill discovered that the American president was more disposed to accommodate Soviet strategic demands rather than to present a united Anglo-American front, including overriding Churchill's preferred Mediterranean strategy in favour of Operation Overlord.⁸¹ Churchill's infamous private reflection was that he sat with "the big Russian bear [and] the great American Elephant, and between the two sat the poor little British donkey who is the only one who knows the right way home."⁸² This reveals the gap between the public performance of partnership and the private experience of marginalisation. At Casablanca in January 1943, when Roosevelt announced the policy of "unconditional surrender" without prior agreement with Churchill, the latter admitted privately that he had been caught off-guard.⁸³ The structural reality of the wartime alliance, with American industrial dominance, growing American strategic

⁷⁹ Bradley F. Smith, *The Ultra-Magic Deals and the Most Secret Special Relationship, 1940-1946*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 131-172.

⁸⁰ Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, 75.

⁸¹ Keith Sainsbury, *The Turning Point*, (Oxford University Press, 1985), 222-3.

⁸² Violet Bonham Carter, *Champion Redoubtable: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter, 1914-1945* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), 312-3. See Appendix F, Figure 8 for this visual.

⁸³ Drew Middleton, *Retreat from Victory; a Critical Appraisal of American Foreign and Military Policy from 1920 to the 1970s*, (New York, Hawthorn Books, 1973), 53-4.

authority, British financial dependence, was the condition against which the mythology of partnership was being constructed and deployed.

What the wartime cooperation had produced, by 1944, was the raw material from which a partnership of equals could be convincingly narrated. The transactions of Destroyers-for-Bases and Lend-Lease, the institutional architecture of the Combined Chiefs of Staff and the intelligence frameworks, the personal correspondence of Churchill and Roosevelt: these were the first-order historical signs that the myth required. That they had been driven by strategic calculation, material necessity, and an asymmetry of power that grew more pronounced with every passing year was precisely what made the rhetorical transformation necessary. Churchill understood, with the instinct of a politician as much as a historian, that the relationship's durability could not rest on its empirical foundations alone. What was required was elevation, the conversion of contingent wartime arrangements into the expression of something natural, timeless, and civilisational.

B. Rhetorical Construction

While each of these episodes constituted the first-order historical signs from which the myth would be constructed, it was Churchill (and Roosevelt's) rhetorical inscription of their meaning, the transformation of contingent transactions and agreements into expressions of natural and civilisational kinship, that elevated the wartime alliance into the "Special Relationship". The Atlantic Charter and Churchill's "Iron Curtain" address at Fulton discursively affixed the Special Relationship. Between them, they established the three interlocking frameworks upon which the myth would rest: a moral unity rooted in the joint guardianship of liberal order, a civilisational affinity denominated in the English-speaking peoples, and an imperial-historical logic of inheritance that figured American ascendancy as the orderly succession to British global leadership.

i. The Atlantic Charter

It was the August 1941 meeting at Placentia Bay, where the Atlantic Charter was concocted, that produced the most concentrated act of myth in the wartime relationship.⁸⁴ Churchill crossed the Atlantic aboard the *HMS Prince of Wales* and

⁸⁴ See Appendix F, Figures 2-3 for visuals of the meeting.

boarded *USS Augusta* in conditions of utter secrecy;⁸⁵ Roosevelt was officially on a fishing trip.⁸⁶ The resulting joint declaration, a vision of the post-war world order, opened by proclaiming that the two leaders “deem it right to make known certain common principles in the national policies of their respective countries on which they base their hopes for a better future for the world”.⁸⁷ Its eight points encompassed national self-determination, freedom of trade, freedom of the seas, and a post-war international security organisation. This was a vision of liberal world order, presented as the joint inheritance of two like-minded democracies. What the charter achieved mythologically was a founding text, a shared moral vision inscribed mid-ocean, that could be retrospectively invoked as the intellectual origin of the Special Relationship.

Present in the charter are all three mythological frameworks of the “Special Relationship” that will be examined in the thesis: moral, civilisational, and imperial-historical. Moral: that the United Kingdom and United States are committed to shaping a post-world order according to their moral vision. Civilisational: that the common principles exclusive to the Anglo-American sphere should be the rulebook by which this Brave New World is dictated. One might think the Imperial-Historical mythological lens would fail when it comes to the third point of the charter: self-determination. It did not, because of the respective interpretations of this point by Roosevelt and Churchill. Churchill understood “the restoration of the sovereignty, self-government and national life of the States and nations of Europe now under the Nazi yoke” to be “quite a separate problem from the progressive evolution of self-governing institutions in the regions and peoples which owe allegiance to the British Crown,”⁸⁸ stating so in his announcement of the Charter to the House of Commons. At this point, Churchill was deliberately compartmentalising what the self-determination clause would mean for the British Empire. Roosevelt had strongly expressed the American view during the meeting of Placentia Bay. Prior to the meeting, Roosevelt had reported to his son that “we’ve got to make clear to the British from the very outset that we don’t intend to be simply a good-time Charlie

⁸⁵ See Appendix F, Figure 1 for photograph of *HMS Prince of Wales* from the view of *USS Augusta*.

⁸⁶ Theodore A. Wilson, *The First Summit: Roosevelt and Churchill at Placentia Bay, 1941*, (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 25, 56-76.

⁸⁷ “The Atlantic Charter”, Official NATO Texts and Resources, 14 August 1941.

⁸⁸ David John Morgan, *The Official History of Colonial Development: Guidance towards Self-Government in British Colonies, 1941-1971* (Macmillan, 1980) 4-5.

who can be used to help the British Empire out of a tight spot”.⁸⁹ These two conflicting positions were shelved because of the Charter’s ambiguity, which allowed respective interpretations.⁹⁰ This would lead to a deferred reckoning, by which time Roosevelt would have passed away, and the financial state of the British Empire would be in ruin, forcing its decline anyhow.

ii. *The “Iron Curtain” Speech*

Churchill’s “Iron Curtain”⁹¹ speech at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri on 5 March 1946 marks the point at which the mythology of the wartime alliance entered its post-war stage, formally consolidated as a peacetime diplomatic framework. The circumstances of the speech are themselves mythologically significant. Churchill was no longer Prime Minister, having lost the general election of July 1945, and stood before his Fulton audience as a “private visitor”.⁹² He was speaking on American soil, introduced by President Truman, who had journeyed to Missouri by overnight train in Churchill’s company.⁹³ That Truman was present at all, lending the prestige of his office to Churchill’s platform, was what Churchill had made an implied condition of acceptance.⁹⁴ The setting thus staged the relationship that Churchill was about to invoke: an American president in deference to a British statesman, despite the collapse of British power.

The speech’s central rhetorical act was the definitive public articulation of the phrase “Special Relationship”. Churchill came to “the crux of what I have travelled here to say,” arguing that the world’s problems could not be addressed “without what I have called the fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples. This means a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States.”⁹⁵ The sentiment of the Anglo-American “Special Relationship” had appeared in some of Churchill’s previous speeches, such as in one he gave to Harvard University on September 6, 1943 where he touches on the “fraternal association”

⁸⁹ Elliott Roosevelt, *As He Saw It*, (New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946), 24.

⁹⁰ This ambiguity, that had permitted the success of the Atlantic Charter, would be later paralleled in the ambiguity of the Nassau communiqué.

⁹¹ Also known as the “Fulton Speech” or the “Sinews of Peace” address.

⁹² ‘The Sinews of Peace (‘Iron Curtain Speech’), *International Churchill Society*, 5 March 1946.

⁹³ Martin Gilbert, *Never Despair: Winston S. Churchill, 1945-1965*, (Toronto: Stoddart, 1988), 196-7.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 189

⁹⁵ Churchill, ‘The Sinews of Peace (‘Iron Curtain Speech’)’.

between the “British and American peoples.”⁹⁶ The phrase “Special Relationship” first emerged publicly in a speech at the House of Commons on 7 November 1945, wherein Churchill cautions against “abandoning our special relationship with the United States and Canada about the atomic bomb”.⁹⁷ Lord Halifax had also written about the potential for “special association” between the US and the UK.⁹⁸ However, the “Iron Curtain” speech gave the term “Special Relationship” its canonical formulation and embedded it in the transatlantic diplomatic vocabulary. Its function was prescriptive. Churchill was arguing for the maintenance and deepening of a relationship whose wartime institutional basis was eroding, or at least entering a post-conflict status.

The speech’s civilisational architecture warrants close attention. Churchill declared that “we must never cease to proclaim in fearless tones the great principles of freedom and the rights of man which are the joint inheritance of the English-speaking world and which through Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the Habeas Corpus, trial by jury, and the English common law find their most famous expression in the American Declaration of Independence.”⁹⁹ Churchill cites a deliberate genealogy: Magna Carta, Bill of Rights, Habeas Corpus, trial by jury, common law, and the Declaration of Independence. Incredibly, the Declaration is figured as an expression of British legal inheritance, as opposed to a rupture. The American Revolution, in this reading, was not a separation from Britain but a flowering of British political culture transplanted to new soil. This is inherently Barthesian, in that a contingent historical event has been recast as the natural expression of a timeless civilisational identity. Churchill also proposed an eventual common citizenship: “Eventually there may come— I feel eventually there will come—the principle of common citizenship, but that we may be content to leave to destiny, whose outstretched arm many of us can already clearly see.”¹⁰⁰ This vision of Anglo-American fusion went further than any subsequent formulation, in Churchill declaring the political acknowledgement of a prior natural unity.

⁹⁶ ‘The Price of Greatness’, *International Churchill Society*, 29 August 2008.

⁹⁷ ‘Foreign Policy (President Truman’s Declaration)’, Hansard, UK Parliament, 7 November 1945.

⁹⁸ John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 11.

⁹⁹ Churchill, Sinews.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Between them, the Atlantic Charter and the Fulton address produced the myth's rhetorical foundations, each document bearing the weight of a distinct mythological register. The Charter's language of "common principles," and "better future for the world,"¹⁰¹ established the alliance as a shared civilising mission. The "Iron Curtain" speech, by contrast, was primarily civilisational in its architecture: Churchill's deliberate genealogy from Magna Carta to the Declaration of Independence, his invocation of the English-speaking peoples, his vision of eventual common citizenship. Together, they established the myth with its two most publicly legible dimensions. The imperial-historical framework, by contrast, required no such explicit articulation, and indeed could not have survived it. To have stated openly that American global ascendancy represented the inheritance of British imperial purpose would have been to expose precisely what both parties needed the myth to conceal. Britain was in decline, America was its successor, and the "Special Relationship" was the diplomatic formula by which this transfer of power was being rendered tolerable. The imperial-historical logic operated most effectively as a substructure, felt rather than declared, available for private expression in the idiom of Macmillan's Greek-Roman metaphor but not in official rhetoric. Its power derived from the very fact of its remaining unspoken.

What Churchill and Roosevelt had constructed in rhetoric, the post-war order would now be required to sustain in practice. The myth had been produced through deliberate rhetorical labour. Yet its durability could not rest on language alone. For the "Special Relationship" to survive its founders, the dissipation of the existential conditions of the war, the erosion of Britain's material power, and the growing divergence of Anglo-American strategic interests, it required institutional form. It needed structures durable enough to make the myth's claims feel self-evidently true long after the conditions that had produced them had passed.

C. Institutionalisation of the "Special Relationship" with US Leadership

Beginning in 1947 and accelerating through 1949, the wartime rhetoric of partnership, the wartime institutionalisation of the relationship, and the rhetorical

¹⁰¹ "The Atlantic Charter", NATO.

binds of the two countries were encoded in a series of durable peacetime frameworks: The Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the Five Eyes intelligence network. These sustained the relationship's practical content even as its mythological language became increasingly detached from underlying power realities. This institutionalisation was of British dependency, managed through the consistent use of the language of partnership.

a. The Truman Doctrine

The Truman Doctrine of March 1947 was a critical moment of moral re-institutionalisation. It was triggered directly by Britain's admission that it could no longer sustain its commitments in Greece and Turkey, an admission that constituted a public acknowledgement of imperial exhaustion.¹⁰² President Truman appeared before a joint session of Congress on 12 March to declare that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."¹⁰³ The speech's "two ways of life" passage distinguished a way of life "based upon the will of the majority" from one "based on the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority". This was reproducing the moral vocabulary that the wartime alliance had used against Nazi Germany, in a Cold War register. What had been the language of anti-fascism was now the language of anti-communism.

The significance of the Doctrine for the myth's operation was that the American assumption of Britain's strategic commitments was framed as the continuation of a shared moral mission that Britain had helped to found. Henry Wallace articulated this imperial succession directly: "One year ago at Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill called for diplomatic against Soviet Russia [...] Now President Truman proposes we take over Britain's hopeless task."¹⁰⁴ The myth had absorbed a moment of British strategic collapse and rendered it, in the language of Truman's address, as the next step of the liberal democratic project.

¹⁰² Robert Frazier, 'Did Britain Start the Cold War? Bevin and the Truman Doctrine', *The Historical Journal* 27, no. 3 (1984): 715.

¹⁰³ 'Truman Doctrine (1947)', National Archives, 21 January 1947.

¹⁰⁴ 'Speech on the Truman Doctrine', *Teaching American History*, March 13, 1947.

b. The Marshall Plan

If the Truman Doctrine was the moment at which America assumed Britain's strategic commitments in the language of the moral mission, the Marshall Plan was the moment at which the US aided Britain's economy in the language of partnership. Announced by Secretary of State George C. Marshall at Harvard on 5 June 1947, the European Recovery Program offered American financial assistance to the war-devastated economies of Western Europe.¹⁰⁵

Britain was the single largest beneficiary of the Marshall Plan, receiving approximately 2.7 billion dollars.¹⁰⁶ Yet the terms on which that aid was received exposed the structural contradiction at the heart of British post-war self-conception. At the Anglo-American talks in London in June 1947, the central issue was what "Europe" meant in George C. Marshall's proposal. William L. Clayton, the then first Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, confirmed that Britain was included, but only on the same side of the table as the other beneficiaries.¹⁰⁷ To Ernest Bevin, British Foreign Secretary, this was intolerable. "If the United Kingdom were simply 'lumped in' and regarded as 'merely another European country', he argued, it would sacrifice 'the little bit of dignity we have left'."¹⁰⁸ But Britain could neither afford to spurn Marshall Aid nor to sustain the Empire that justified its special status, and sought to avoid American isolationism that would have left them bereft.¹⁰⁹ Just as with Lend-Lease, the Marshall Plan was domesticated by the myth into the language of mutual investment in a shared liberal order, when its structural logic was American economic dominance providing managed support for a diminished ally. A relationship of dependency was transformed into a narrative of partnership.

Yet the Marshall Plan was not without genuine American self-interest in another register. G. John Ikenberry notes that American officials were preoccupied with the legitimacy of the postwar Western order, and that the Marshall Plan was a conscious instrument of that project. There was a "strong desire to have Europeans to embrace

¹⁰⁵ George C. Marshall, 'Remarks by the Honourable George C. Marshall, Secretary of State, at Harvard University on June 5, 1947', 5 June 1947.

¹⁰⁶ Dr Luke Gibbon, 'What's the Context? US Secretary of State Proposes a "Marshall Plan" for the Reconstruction of Europe', 12 June 2017, GOV.UK. See Appendix E, Graph 1 for a visual comparison on how much aid Britain received compared to the rest of Europe.

¹⁰⁷ Clarke, *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire*, 492.,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 493.

¹⁰⁹ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory : Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2001), 193.

American aid and plans as their own, thus enhancing the legitimacy of the overall postwar settlement.”¹¹⁰ The Marshall Plan was thus a cornerstone of the liberal Western postwar order. American dominance provided the architecture of the new world order, while the mutual benefits it conferred provided its legitimacy.¹¹¹ Thus, Britain’s dependency was absorbed into a broader architecture in which American power was institutionalised, and in which the myth of partnership served American strategic interests as much as it consoled British decline. This is a key example of where the moral dimension of the myth was institutionalised, for the “future peace and security of the world.”¹¹² This is also a subtle example of the imperial-historical frame: the transfer of responsibility from one English-Speaking power to the next.

c. NATO

NATO’s creation in April 1949 appeared to give the Anglo-American axis a multilateral home, but its origins reveal that the bilateral relationship was its structural core. It was British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin who channelled the mood of Western Europe into the idea of a treaty, and broader security architecture.¹¹³ Sir Nicholas Henderson, secretary in the Washington D.C. British embassy, recorded from direct participation in the negotiations. When Bevin met Marshall in December 1947, he proposed “a sort of spiritual federation of the West, preferably with an unwritten constitution.”¹¹⁴ Notably, this frames collective security in the civilisational idiom of the Special Relationship. The opening tripartite talks in Washington were deliberately confined to the US, the UK, and Canada, on the grounds that “already very close cooperation on all security matters between the US and the UK took place through the Combined Chiefs of Staff” and that it was “better, therefore, to proceed at the outset just between the two.”¹¹⁵ In Barthesian terms, this retrospectively highlights the Combined Chiefs of Staff as a first-order historical sign, a contingent wartime arrangement, transformed into a second-order signifier of the naturalness of Anglo-American primacy in the architecture of Western security.

¹¹⁰ Ikenberry, *After Victory*, 202.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² William Clayton, ‘Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs (Clayton)’, Office of the Historian, 27 May 1947.

¹¹³ Nicholas Henderson, *The Birth Of Nato* (Avalon Publishing, 1983) 113.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 1.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 14.

The alliance's founding preamble reproduced the civilisational vocabulary of the Atlantic Charter, its parties resolved to "safeguard the freedom, common heritage, and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law."¹¹⁶ Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech idiom was thus encoded into a binding treaty, institutionalising the civilisational dimension of the myth in the architecture of Western security. Within this framework, Britain occupied a privileged position. As John Baylis demonstrates, the UK was brought into NATO alongside the United States as "one of the two most important members of the new alliance," and American military planning initially envisaged "strategic and command relationships in Western Europe in which Britain was envisaged as taking the leading role."¹¹⁷ He argues that preferential treatment Britain received within the alliance, particularly on nuclear matters, "contributed very significantly to the maintenance of the harmful illusion that Britain remained a great power."¹¹⁸ The post-war belief that Britain retained global responsibilities at a time of rapid economic decline "played an important part in the over-stretch of Britain's defence resources."¹¹⁹ While NATO gave the "Special Relationship" a multilateral institutional form, it also encoded its fundamental asymmetry. NATO therefore actively institutionalised and reproduced the mythological operation of the Special Relationship, sustaining the performance of equality where little material basis for it existed.

d. The McMahon Act

The starkest institutional contradiction of the early post-war period was the McMahon Act of 1946. The Quebec Agreement of August 1942 had established the principle of Anglo-American pooling of nuclear resources and prohibited either party from using atomic weapons "against the other" or "against third parties without each other's consent."¹²⁰ The Hyde Park aide-mémoire of September 1944 stated that "full [nuclear] collaboration [...] should continue after the defeat of Japan unless and until

¹¹⁶ 'The North Atlantic Treaty', NATO, 4 April 1949.

¹¹⁷ John Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations, 1939-1984: The Special Relationship*, (London: Macmillan, 1984), 39.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 208.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, 'Agreement Relating to Atomic Energy (The Quebec Agreement)', Office of the Historian, 19 August 1943;

terminated by joint agreement.”¹²¹ Despite this, Congress passed the Atomic Information Act (the McMahon Act), prohibiting the exchange of any atomic information with any foreign nation. This was a “major curtailment” for the Special Relationship.¹²² This was at the moment in which Britain believed itself, in Attlee’s own words to Truman, “entitled, both by the documents and the history of our common efforts in the past”¹²³ to nuclear collaboration. The Act demonstrated with clinical clarity that the “Special Relationship” had definite structural limits. The United States was willing to exclude its closest ally from the most consequential military technology of the post-war world. Britain’s response was to develop its own atomic bomb, driven, as Attlee later explained, by the fear that “there was always the possibility of their withdrawing and becoming isolationist once again.”¹²⁴ McMahon was a shock to the system. Britain was operating under an unspoken imperative to remain indispensable to a partner whose commitment could never be fully guaranteed. However, this was one of the first instances where the myth of partnership demonstrated its adaptability and ideological management of the alliance. The break away was sublimated into Britain’s “independent deterrent” programme, which was itself mythologised as an expression of British great-power resolve. The bomb Britain tested in October 1952 was thus portrayed as proof of British capability and a “historic episode”¹²⁵, not as an indictment of American unreliability.

e. UKUSA

The intelligence relationship, formalised in the UKUSA Agreement of March 1946, provided the “Special Relationship” with its most genuinely intimate institutional expression. The agreement’s call for “unrestricted”¹²⁶ exchange of signals intelligence between the United States and Britain (expanded subsequently to include Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in the Five Eyes network) created a relationship of mutual access to the most sensitive intelligence product that no other

¹²¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, ‘Aide-Mémoire Initialed by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill’, Office of the Historian, 19 September 1944.

¹²² Andrew J. Pierre, *Nuclear Politics: The British Experience with an Independent Strategic Force, 1939-1970* (Oxford University Press, 1972), 70.

¹²³ Clement Attlee, ‘The British Prime Minister (Attlee) to President Truman’, Office of the Historian, 7 June 1946.

¹²⁴ Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations, 1939-1984*, 33.

¹²⁵ ‘British Atomic Bomb Test - Hansard - UK Parliament’, 23 October 1952.

¹²⁶ United Kingdom and United States, ‘BRITISH-U.S. COMMUNICATION INTELLIGENCE AGREEMENT (UKUSA Agreement)’, National Security Agency, 5 March 1946.

bilateral relationship possessed. John Dumbrell identifies intelligence cooperation as “the essence and beating heart of the Cold War ‘special relationship’”.¹²⁷

f. What’s Next?

Though the Attlee-Truman relationship was functional as opposed to the mythologically charged Churchill-Roosevelt relationship, the institutional architecture established during the wartime partnership continued to operate, demonstrating that the myth had been successfully embedded in durable structures that could survive the removal of its founders. Attlee’s private account of his December 1950 Washington talks, that Britain was “lifted out of the ‘European queue’ and treated as a partner unequal no doubt in power but still equal in counsel”¹²⁸, exactly captures the formula of the myth. At this point, the inequality is acknowledged by the Prime Minister, but is absorbed into a language of partnership that renders it tolerable and legitimate. This is the myth’s mature form: its domestication into a shared framework of meaning that both parties could work within. This slots neatly into the imperial-historical argument: that Britain knew they were the smaller partner, with the United States as their successor, with the wisdom to guide them; hence, Harold Macmillan’s famous Greek-Roman quip.

By the mid-1950’s, the mythological architecture of the “Special Relationship” was structurally complete. Three narratives, civilisational, moral, and imperial-historical, had been woven from the materials of wartime cooperation and post-war institution-building into a framework that naturalised British dependence as partnership, American dominance as leadership, and the contingent outcomes of a historical crisis as the expression of an inherited, civilisational, and moral bond. The myth had been produced through deliberate rhetorical labour, of which Churchill was the chief architect through his speeches, historical writings, and personal diplomacy. However, this rhetoric and symbolism had then been institutionally embedded in NATO, UKUSA, the Marshall Plan, and the Truman Doctrine in a way that gave it a material durability which survived the departure of Churchill and Roosevelt.

This durability, however, rested on a structural concealment. The myth had been built to manage a reality of deepening asymmetry, and the crises that would

¹²⁷ Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*, 160.

¹²⁸ Alex Danchev, *On Specialness: Essays in Anglo-American Relations* (Macmillan, 1998), 127.

define the next decade would test whether it could continue to do so. What Suez would reveal was that the myth of the “Special Relationship” was resilient but not indestructible. When the material reality became impossible to mythologise, the consequences for British foreign policy would be severe. The question that Part II must address is why the myth failed at Suez, and more importantly, how it has proved capable of surviving.

Chapter II: Trouble in Suez (1956)

In which the Suez Crisis, and the events preludeing the catastrophe, are detailed. A mix of misunderstanding, echoes of appeasement, and imperial nostalgia allows Anthony Eden to subject the myth to its greatest test to date. From the Americans, a certain degree of mixed messaging is played out in their bid to stall Eden's unilateral action. Ending in a disaster of financial coercion and humiliation, it is nearly curtains for the "Special Relationship", until an unlikely hero moves to save the day...

A. The Inheritance: Eden, Nasser, and Echoes of War

The three mythological frameworks of the Special Relationship: civilisational, moral, and imperial-historical, had been cultivated under the pressure of existential threat, resulting in an asymmetric alliance that both parties had a powerful interest in representing as a partnership. By the mid-1950s, the institutional architecture of that alliance had given the myth substance. It had been forged, furnished, and embellished. But it had not yet been tested. The Suez Canal Crisis is a significant episode in the myth, for it was the "Special Relationship's" first and greatest "test". This chapter will investigate why, on what accounts the myth was tested, and how it was recovered.

The myth's most vulnerable element was also its most consequential: the imperial-historical narrative, which was somewhat dependent on the belief that British and American strategic interests in the post-colonial world were continuous, and that Britain retained something approaching the standing of a co-equal with the wisdom to guide the newly dominant hegemon. However, as Hitchens's analysis implies, the imperial succession of the relationship is significant because it operates below the level of official rhetoric, an "unspoken convention" that "governed the relationship".¹²⁹ The imperial-historical narrative figures American global leadership as the orderly succession to British imperial purpose, as a transfer of a civilising mission. At Suez, this is Anthony Eden's miscalculation. He acts as though this transfer has not occurred, that Britain still possesses the vestige of its empire, which has in fact diminished.

¹²⁹ Hitchens, *Blood, Class, and Empire: The Enduring Anglo-American Relationship*, 47.

However, this is only Eden's first violation, and as Hitchens identifies, it happens mostly beneath the surface of formal discourse. Surprisingly, the dimension to the myth that is most explicitly challenged and tested during the Suez Crisis is the moral dimension. At Suez, the moral narrative was inverted. This is the reason for its catastrophic fallout, and why it remains such a scar in the memory of the UK and the US. The language of international law and democratic legitimacy, that Britain had helped construct, was turned against the UK as the moral narrative was violated by Eden.

i. Eden vs. the Reality of Post-War Britain

The years between the "Iron Curtain" speech and the nationalisation of the Suez Canal were years of managed decline of the British Empire, diplomatically obscured by the persistent language of partnership.¹³⁰ Britain had emerged from the Second World War as the most indebted of the victorious powers, its dollar reserves exhausted,¹³¹ its empire under nationalist pressure from India¹³² to Palestine,¹³³ its industrial capacity outstripped by both its principal ally and its principal adversary.¹³⁴ Yet the mythological architecture of the "Special Relationship" required this decline be narrated as adaptation, a voluntary modulation of Britain's world role within a joint project of liberal international order. The Attlee governments had navigated this terrain with considerable tactical skill. Each concession to the Americans, whether it be the McMahon Act, NATO membership negotiation, Marshall Aid, had been simultaneously reframed as a demonstration of British agency rather than an accommodation of American power. By the time Churchill returned to Downing Street in October 1951,¹³⁵ the language of partnership had been institutionally

¹³⁰ David Reynolds, 'A "Special Relationship"? America, Britain and the International Order Since the Second World War', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 62, no. 1 (1985): 13.

¹³¹ Alan S. Milward, *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945-51*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 38-39.

¹³² Penderel Moon, *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*, ([London]: Duckworth; [Bloomington, Ind.]: Distributed by Indiana University Press, 1989), 1170-1189.

¹³³ Michael Cohen et al., *Demise of the British Empire in the Middle East: Britain's Responses to Nationalist Movements, 1943-55* (Routledge, 1998), 563873, xv.

¹³⁴ Correlli Barnett, "The Prospect Is Bleak" in *The Audit of War: The Illusion & Reality of Britain as a Great Nation*, (London: Macmillan, 1986), 55-63.

¹³⁵ BBC, 1951: *Churchill Back in Power at Last*, 5 April 2005.

consolidated to the point where its underlying asymmetry was, at least in official discourse, effectively invisible.¹³⁶

Anthony Eden inherited this framework in April 1955, and his tenure as Prime Minister would expose its structural fragility. Eden was in many respects the ideal custodian of the “Special Relationship” myth.¹³⁷ He was a diplomat of extraordinary personal cultivation and linguistic range,¹³⁸ and a veteran of wartime alliance management who had served as Churchill’s Foreign Secretary throughout the crucial years of the alliance’s construction.¹³⁹ His relationship with Eisenhower, though definitively more businesslike than the Roosevelt-Churchill relationship, was rooted in wartime acquaintance and a shared perception of Soviet threat.¹⁴⁰ They even resumed correspondence,¹⁴¹ as Roosevelt and Churchill had done in the war and Attlee and Truman had failed to continue.¹⁴² Eden believed that Britain remained America’s indispensable partner, that its accumulated imperial experience, its networks across the Middle East and Asia, and its diplomatic capital gave it a claim on American strategic attention that no other ally could match.¹⁴³ This belief, in 1955, was not entirely without foundation. But it was a belief that required, for its credibility, the United States to accept a conception of the alliance that Washington was ceasing to endorse.¹⁴⁴

The structural tension originated in the Eisenhower administration’s attitude toward Britain’s residual imperial position. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles valued the British relationship as the most important of America’s many bilateral partnerships,¹⁴⁵ but they did not regard it as categorically different in kind from other alliances, and they did not accept the endorsement of British imperial interests. Eisenhower and Dulles viewed those interests, particularly

¹³⁶ W. Scott Lucas, *Divided We Stand: Britain, the US, and the Suez Crisis*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), 5-18.

¹³⁷ D. R. Thorpe, *Eden: The Life and Times of Anthony Eden, First Earl of Avon, 1897-1977*, (London: Pimlico, 2004), 191.

¹³⁸ Keith Kyle, *Suez: Britain’s End of Empire in the Middle East*, New ed (I.B. Tauris, 2011), 9.

¹³⁹ Thorpe, *Eden*, xx-xxi.

¹⁴⁰ David M. Watry, *Diplomacy at the Brink: Eisenhower, Churchill, and Eden in the Cold War*, (LSU Press, 2014), 111.

¹⁴¹ However, this was prompted by Churchill. See Watry 111.

¹⁴² “Eisenhower, Eden and the Suez Crisis” in *Twentieth-Century Anglo-American Relations* (Palgrave, 2001), 167.

¹⁴³ Thorpe, *Eden* 382.

¹⁴⁴ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 18-19.

¹⁴⁵ Nigel John Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan, and the Problem of Nasser: Anglo-American Relations and Arab Nationalism, 1955-59*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 110-6.

Britain's predominance in the Middle East, as a strategic liability in the competition for post-colonial nationalist allegiances that both powers were simultaneously conducting across the global South.¹⁴⁶ Post-colonial nationalism, in their calculation, needed to be harnessed rather than antagonised; British military and economic predominance in the Arab world was a source of instability to be managed.¹⁴⁷ The Eisenhower administration's attitude toward Britain in the early 1950s oscillated between the warmth of personal alliance and the cold strategic calculation that Pax Britannica's remnants were becoming an embarrassment. It was this unresolved oscillation that contributed decisively to the catastrophe of 1956.

ii. *Nasser-nalisation: The Appeasement Analogy*

The immediate trigger of the Suez Crisis was Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company on 26 July 1956.¹⁴⁸ However, the Crisis had been brewing long before that date by the particular mythological framework through which Eden understood both Nasser and the British position in the Middle East. Eden's first significant encounter with Nasser had taken place in Cairo, February 1955. Eden, the then-Foreign Secretary, visited the Colonel at the British Embassy.¹⁴⁹ The contrast between the two men was symbolic. Eden arrived in evening dress, addressing his host in classical Arabic with the ease of an Oxford orientalist; Nasser appeared in his lieutenant-colonel's field uniform, noting privately afterward the theatrical condescension of the performance: "what elegance! It was made to look as if we were beggars and they were princes."¹⁵⁰ Eden departed impressed by Nasser's intelligence but possessed of a permanent conviction that he harboured ambitions incompatible with continued British influence. He reported to London that Nasser was "not open to conviction."¹⁵¹ He further commented that "no doubt jealousy plays a part in this and a frustrated desire to lead the Arab world."¹⁵² The implication here, of course, is the imperialist assumption that Britain leads the Arab world and will continue to do so. Britain as the experienced patron who

¹⁴⁶ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 19.

¹⁴⁷ Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan, and the Problem of Nasser*, 20-21.

¹⁴⁸ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 138.

¹⁴⁹ Anthony Eden, *Full Circle: The Memoirs of Anthony Eden*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 244-5.

¹⁵⁰ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 40.

¹⁵¹ Eden, *Full Circle*, 245.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

judgement is standard, Egypt as the capable but recalcitrant client. This would go on to frame every subsequent development.

Eden was performing Rome in the Macmillan metaphor. But the imperial-historical logic of the “Special Relationship” had already dictated that Britain was Greece, the diminished partner whose accumulated wisdom conferred influence, not authority, and only insofar as America chose to recognise it. Eden’s entire subsequent enterprise at Suez was built on this foundational confusion: he acted as though Britain retained the unilateral standing to enforce order in its former sphere of influence without American sanction. The moral dimension of the myth would bear the most public strain at Suez, and its violation at Sèvres would prove the most visible catastrophe. The imperial-historical violation, however, preceded it, present in this interaction between Eden and Nasser—in assuming that the problem was Nasser’s jealousy rather than Britain’s obsolescence.

When Nasser announced the nationalisation on the 26 July 1956, in a speech at Alexandria, he did so in a rhetoric explicitly designed to mobilise pan-Arab nationalism.¹⁵³ He spoke in “the Arabic of the streets”, as opposed to a formal register, proclaiming that, “we shall all of us defend our nationalism and our Arabism.”¹⁵⁴ He invoked the memory of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French diplomat and developer of the Suez Canal under which “120,000 [Egyptian labourers] died without getting paid.”¹⁵⁵ This was both a mobilising grievance for his audience and a coded signal to the Egyptian engineers to seize the Canal’s technical facilities.¹⁵⁶ Nasser framed the nationalisation as the recovery of Egyptian sovereignty over a canal that had been constructed by Egyptian labour and for generations managed for the profit of foreign shareholders. “In the name of the nation,” he declared, “The Universal Company of the Suez Maritime Canal (Egyptian joint-stock company) is hereby nationalized.”¹⁵⁷

The Suez begins to reveal a fracture in the mythological architecture that has sustained it. Eden’s response to the nationalisation was cast almost entirely within the moral register of the “Special Relationship” myth. In Eden’s private

¹⁵³ See Appendix F, Figure 9 for a visual of Nasser’s speech.

¹⁵⁴ Kyle, *Suez*, 132.

¹⁵⁵ ‘Speech by President Nasser, Alexandria, July 26 [1956] (Extract)’, July 26, 1956.

¹⁵⁶ Kyle, *Suez*, 132.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Speech by Nasser’.

communications with Eisenhower, and in discussions that followed, he reached consistently for the analogy of the Munich Conference of 1938, and the language of appeasement. Nasser was, in Eden's reading, a new Mussolini:¹⁵⁸ a nationalist whose would not be stopped by appeasement and whose challenge, unmet, would trigger a cascade of imperial retreat across the Arab world. Evelyn Shuckburgh, Assistant Under-Secretary at the time, wrote on the 29 January 1956 that in a heated discussion on the matter, "[Eden] all but called me an appeaser."¹⁵⁹ Writing to Eisenhower on March 4th, Eden states that "Certainly we should accept, I think, that a policy of appeasement will bring us nothing in Egypt. Our best chance is to show that it pays to be our friends."¹⁶⁰ In July 1956, Eden wrote to Eisenhower that "My colleagues and I are convinced that we must be ready, in the last resort, to use force to bring Nasser to his senses."¹⁶¹ Writing to Eisenhower in November, he stated that "Nasser would have become a kind of Moslem Mussolini".¹⁶² Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company was also a violation of the Constantinople Convention of 1888, which had guaranteed freedom of navigation through the Canal to vessels of all nations in perpetuity.¹⁶³ This provided Eden with further basis to invoke the moral dimension.

The invocation of readiness for force is a performance of mythological identity. Anyone who counselled patience was cast as Chamberlain. That Eden himself had served as Foreign Secretary during the years of appeasement, and that his political identity had been partly constructed around his resignation in protest against appeasement, gave the analogy a charged personal resonance. It is in this way that he invokes the moral dimension to the myth: his writings to Eisenhower make a direct claim on the wartime compact, an insistence that the Special Relationship's founding purpose, the joint defence of the liberal order against totalitarian aggression,

¹⁵⁸ Evelyn Shuckburgh and John Charmley, *Descent to Suez: Diaries, 1951-56*, (New York: Norton, 1987), 327.

¹⁵⁹ Shuckburgh, *Descent*, 327.

¹⁶⁰ Anthony Eden, 'Letter From Prime Minister Eden to President Eisenhower', Office of the Historian, 4 March 1956.

¹⁶¹ Anthony Eden, 'Message From Prime Minister Eden to President Eisenhower (ii)', Office of the Historian, 27 July 1956.

¹⁶² Anthony Eden, 'Message From Prime Minister Eden to President Eisenhower (i)', 5 November 1956.

¹⁶³ Kyle, *Suez*, 15-16.

obligated America to recognise Nasser as the threat that Eden had already decided he was.

This is a Barthesian mythological operation. The first-order historical sign, Nasser's nationalisation of the company, was elevated into a second-order signifier. It was elevated to proof that Arab nationalism was a totalitarian force analogous to Italian fascism, that Egypt's control of the Canal zone was structurally equivalent to Hitler's remilitarisation of the Rhineland, and that Eden's personal obligation was to refuse the accommodation that Chamberlain had made at Munich. As subsequent historians have demonstrated, the analogy was misguided.¹⁶⁴ However, the mythological function of the appeasement frame was rhetorical and emotional. It organised Eden's perception of every subsequent development, made the signals of American opposition legible only as a temporary vacillation, and most damagingly, insulated him from the growing evidence that the United States had a fundamentally different analysis of what Nasser's act both represented and required.

B. All for One and None for All: Operation Musketeer and Sèvres

i. Between Diplomacy and Force

Between Nasser's nationalisation on 26 July 1956 and the execution of Operation Musketeer in the Anglo-French landings at Port Said on 5 November, the public record of the Suez Crisis is one of sustained multilateral diplomacy. Two London Conferences, a mission to Cairo, the construction and collapse of the Suez Canal Users' Association, and deliberation at the United Nations. The private record is one of parallel military planning that had never been completely out of the question. Within days of the nationalisation, the British Egypt Committee sanctioned the initial planning of what would become Operation Musketeer, and the successive phases of diplomatic engagement were conducted against a background of mounting military readiness.¹⁶⁵ The evidence for Eden's early private commitment is found in Eisenhower's letter to Eden of 31 July, drafted before any diplomatic process had been attempted. It warns against Eden's "decision to employ force without delay or

¹⁶⁴ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, ix.

¹⁶⁵ Howard J. Dooley, 'Great Britain's "Last Battle" in the Middle East: Notes on Cabinet Planning during the Suez Crisis of 1956', *The International History Review* 11, no. 3 (1989): 494.

attempting any intermediate and less drastic steps”,¹⁶⁶ which had been communicated to President Eisenhower, alongside Eden’s invocation, in his telegram to Eisenhower of 27 July, of the moral compact of the Special Relationship. What followed was a managed sequence of diplomacy in which Britain went through the motions of multilateral engagement.

Britain’s public posture throughout the Crisis was that of a power committed to pursuing diplomatic means while reserving the right to force only as a last resort sanctioned by international consensus. As Eden proclaims in his address to the House of Commons on 2 August, “the freedom and security of transit through the Canal, without discrimination, and the efficiency of its operation can be effectively ensured only by an international authority.”¹⁶⁷ At the same time, Eden admits that “in view of the uncertain situation created by the actions of the Egyptian Government, Her Majesty’s Government have thought it necessary—and I wanted to take this first opportunity to tell the House—to take certain precautionary measures of a military nature.”¹⁶⁸ Hugh Gaitskell, the leader of the opposition, felt it necessary to remind the House and Eden that “that we are signatories to the United Nations Charter, and that [...] we have steadfastly avoided any international action which would be in breach of international law or, indeed, contrary to the public opinion of the world. We must not, therefore, allow ourselves to get into a position where we might be denounced in the Security Council as aggressors, or where the majority of the Assembly were against us.”¹⁶⁹ Obviously, this warning was not heeded.

Two further circumstances shaped the period. The first, Eden’s physical condition. Throughout the autumn of 1956, Eden was operating under the combined effects of a chronic biliary condition and a dependence on amphetamines and sedatives that his physicians had prescribed to manage it.¹⁷⁰ It was a regime that medical historian Lord Owen identifies as a cause of volatility, insomnia, and impaired capacity to process qualified information that characterised his conduct of

¹⁶⁶ Dwight D. Eisenhower, ‘Letter From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Eden (ii)’, Office of the Historian, 31 July 1956.

¹⁶⁷ House of Commons, ‘Suez Canal - Volume 557: Debated on Thursday 2 August 1956’, Hansard, 2 August 1956. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Peter J. Kernahan, ‘An Iatrogenic Injury? Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis of 1956’, *The American Surgeon* 89, no. 6 (2022).

the Suez Crisis.¹⁷¹ The second was the asymmetry of motivations within the Anglo-French axis. France was at least as committed to the military option as Britain, but for a different reason. Nasser's material support for the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) insurgency in Algeria made his removal a domestic political imperative in Paris as much as a foreign policy calculation.¹⁷² The difference between the countries was that Britain was acting from wounded material pride and with the mythological expectation of eventual American solidarity. France was acting in strategic interest, with a divergent motivation.

Eden allowed himself to believe that the diplomatic process would either produce a satisfactory outcome or generate the international legitimacy for the force he had privately resolved on. This belief depended on the Americans reading the situation the same way, that invoking the shared duty to resist totalitarian aggression would produce American solidarity as it had in 1941. The sections which follow trace how that expectation was progressively disappointed, through the deliberate ambiguity of Dulles's diplomacy, through the construction and collapse of SCUA, and through the decision taken at Sèvres in late October.

ii. The American Position and the Failure of Mythological Expectation

Eden's initial telegram to Eisenhower on 27 July, a day after Nasser had nationalised the Suez Canal, framed the Suez Crisis in the language of the Special Relationship's moral narrative. He stated that "we cannot afford to allow Nasser to seize control of the Canal in this way, in defiance of international agreements," and that "we must be ready, in the last resort, to use force to bring Nasser to his senses."¹⁷³ By doing so, he was invoking the civilisational partnership that he believed constituted the Special Relationship's character. From the outset, though, the American position was one of opposition. They were not opposed to restraining Nasser, but to the method Eden had already privately resolved upon. Eisenhower's

¹⁷¹ The Rt Hon Lord Owen Ch, 'The Effect of Prime Minister Anthony Eden's Illness on His Decision-Making during the Suez Crisis', *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* 98, no. 6 (2005): 387–402.

¹⁷² Martin Thomas, '1956: the Algerian War Extended and the Suez Intervention' in *The French North African Crisis: Colonial Breakdown and Anglo-French Relations, 1945-62* (Macmillan Press, 2000), 100-130.

¹⁷³ Eden, 'Message From Prime Minister Eden to President Eisenhower, 27 July 1957'.

letter of 31 July warned that public opinion “in most of the world would be outraged” by military action taken before negotiation had been genuinely attempted.¹⁷⁴ He urged for diplomacy first, and force only as a last resort underwritten by international consensus. Eisenhower’s stance was firm, and this letter is one of the documents that Eden was later accused of having ignored.¹⁷⁵ However, there was ambiguity in the diplomatic relations that occurred after Suez’s nationalisation that Eden could subconsciously exploit.

The firmness of Eisenhower’s position rested on a strategic analysis of the nationalisation that diverged from Eden’s. In White House discussions on the morning of 27 July, recorded in Andrew Goodpaster’s staff memoranda, Eisenhower’s initial reading was that Egypt possessed an arguable legal basis for nationalising a company incorporated under Egyptian law on Egyptian territory, and that the United States could not afford to be seen supporting what the wider world would read as a colonial reassertion.¹⁷⁶ His deeper concern was Soviet. An Anglo-French military operation would risk driving Nasser toward Moscow¹⁷⁷ and destabilising the post-colonial nationalist alignments that Washington had been cultivating across the Arab world. He shared the British view that Nasser was a strategic menace, but he did not believe the nationalisation of the Canal Company was the right terrain on which to confront them. In Rachel McDermott’s analysis, Eisenhower regarded the British response as the reflex of a power caught in nineteenth century thinking about empire and prestige.¹⁷⁸ This diagnosis, that Britain was operating from an imperial frame that American strategic logic had already superseded, was precisely the imperial-historical dimension of the myth at its moment of fracture.

Yet the rigidity of Eisenhower’s July 31 letter was almost immediately qualified in a way that would prove consequential. When Dulles arrived at 10 Downing Street

¹⁷⁴ Dwight Eisenhower D., ‘Letter From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Eden (i)’, Office of the Historian, 31 July 1956.

¹⁷⁵ Robert Rhodes James, *Anthony Eden*, (New York : McGraw-Hill, 1987), 473. Eden denies this in his memoir ‘Full Circle’

¹⁷⁶ Andrew Jackson Goodpaster, ‘Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, July 27, 1956, 8:30 a.m.’, Office of the Historian, 27 July 1956.

¹⁷⁷ Goodpaster, ‘Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, July 27, 1956, 8:30 a.m.’

¹⁷⁸ Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics : Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy*, with Internet Archive (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1998).

on 1 August, he communicated to Eden that Eisenhower had written the letter “quite hastily” and that it was “perhaps not as polished as it would have been had he more time”, but he confirmed the letter adequately expressed the President’s basic thinking.¹⁷⁹ The qualification did not change the substance of the American position, but it introduced a register of informality and accommodation. Eden, reading every American engagement through the myth’s vocabulary of personal alliance, thus misinterpreted the form of American diplomacy. As section III examines, this ambiguity was a product of an American diplomatic strategy designed to forestall British military action while maintaining the appearance of allied engagement.

iii. Diplomatic Dulles

When Foster Dulles arrived in London on 1 August and spoke of the need to make Nasser “disgorge the Canal,” Eden extracted the phrase from its surrounding caveats, ignoring evidence of American opposition otherwise.¹⁸⁰ Foster Dulles’s qualification, that force, if not backed by world opinion, would have disastrous results, was interpreted as a procedural request to pass through the motions of a conference before acting.¹⁸¹ His misreading, though puzzling, was the product of a mythological expectation, that an appeal to the shared moral purpose of the “Special Relationship” would eventually, inevitably, produce American solidarity—just as it eventually had in the Second World War. The Americans, in opposition, were operating under an entirely different strategic calculus.

The ambiguity of American communications in the months between July and October 1956 was both a product of genuine diplomatic complexity and the source of the British miscalculation. Dulles’s August diplomacy in London, and the Menzies mission he organised to Cairo,¹⁸² served a dual purpose: to forestall unilateral British

¹⁷⁹ John Foster Dulles, ‘Memorandum of a Conversation Between Prime Minister Eden and Secretary of State Dulles, 10 Downing Street, London, August 1, 1956, 12:45 p.m.’, Office of the Historian, 1 August 1956.

¹⁸⁰ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 153-5.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² John Foster Dulles, ‘Telegram From the Secretary of State to the Department of State’, Office of the Historian, accessed 28 May 2026. The First London Conference (16–23 August 1956) produced an eighteen-power proposal for international control of the Canal. Dulles organised a five-nation committee: Australia, Ethiopia, Iran, Sweden, and the United States, under Menzies’s chairmanship to present the proposal to Nasser in Cairo (3–9 September). Nasser rejected it. Eisenhower’s public statement on 5 September that the United States did not intend to use force fatally undermined the mission’s coercive leverage mid-negotiation. Its failure was the immediate prompt for Dulles’s SCUA proposal. See Kyle, *Suez*, 219-263.

and French military action, and to maintain the appearance of Anglo-American solidarity that Washington needed for its domestic political position and its standing at the United Nations. The resulting ambiguity of Dulles's approach was the most consequential in his personal encounters with the British leadership.

On Dulles's entrance to No. 10 Downing Street, the crowds cheered loudly. Then-Foreign Secretary Lloyd Selwyn notes that the crowds "obviously [...] felt that the wartime alliance was working again," and that "Dulles was, or seemed to be, quite emotionally moved." But this disparity between his public language and private position created ambiguity. Selwyn, in defence of British foreign policy, cited that "Dulles had not been at all specific,"¹⁸³ while Winthrop W. Aldrich, US Ambassador to London, later cited that "there is no doubt in my mind that Dulles at this time gave the impression to Eden that the United States would also be prepared to use force if all else failed."¹⁸⁴ The gap of ambiguity had led Eden to interpret the form of American engagement, in the urgency, personal consultations, and language of shared concern, as confirmation of agreement that had never in fact been reached.

iv. SCUA-ered

The Suez Canal Users' Association (SCUA), proposed by Dulles in September 1956 as an international mechanism for managing Canal revenues, was as such, a product of this epistemic gap. Eden accepted SCUA as evidence of Anglo-American convergence on a policy of economic pressure capable of forcing Egyptian concessions, writing to Churchill on 10 September that the Americans seemed firmly lined up with Britain on internationalism.¹⁸⁵ Dulles, however, designed the Association to provide the appearance of allied action while forestalling the military escalation he regarded as dangerous.¹⁸⁶ Dulles told Eisenhower on 11 September that his immediate motive was to placate the British, that "we had to keep the initiative."¹⁸⁷ Robert D. Murphy, Dulles's Deputy Under Secretary of State, writes that "If John Foster Dulles ever was actually convinced of the possibility of

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Winthrop W. Aldrich, 'The Suez Crisis', *Foreign Affairs*, 1 April 1967.

¹⁸⁵ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 208.

¹⁸⁶ Jonathan Pearson, *Sir Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis: Reluctant Gamble* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 67-8.

¹⁸⁷ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 199.

organising a Canal Users Association to operate the Suez Canal, I was not aware of it.”¹⁸⁸

Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle’s concept of strategic narratives operating simultaneously at the system, identity, and issue levels is applicable here.¹⁸⁹ At the system level, both Britain and the United States were invoking the authority of the liberal international order, and at the identity level, both were claiming to speak as guardians of Western values. But, at the issue level, their narratives prescribed diametrically opposed courses of action. Eden read SCUA through Britain’s identity narrative, as the expression of allied solidarity in defence of treaty rights and international law; Dulles designed it as an issue-level delaying mechanism.

SCUA’s failure followed. At his press conference of 13 September, Dulles publicly pulled the rug from under the Commons statement Eden had delivered the day before. Eden had stated “I must make it clear that if the Egyptian Government should seek to interfere with the operations of the association [...] then that Government will once more be in breach of the Convention of 1888.”¹⁹⁰ Implied in this statement is that a breach of the Convention, based on international law, would provide legal justification for the use of force. And yet, at the conference, when asked whether the Association’s ships would force the Canal, Dulles replied: “We do not intend to shoot our way through.”¹⁹¹ The threat Eden had invoked as the consequence of Egyptian non-cooperation was disavowed by the ally presumed to be committed to it. At the Second London Conference of 19-21 September, Dulles had made it clear that US law precluded any compulsion of American shipowners to divert dues to the Association, undermining the economic leverage Eden had assumed SCUA would provide.¹⁹² By October, he was writing to Lloyd that SCUA’s primary purpose had always been cooperation with Cairo.¹⁹³ The instrument Eden

¹⁸⁸ Robert D. (Robert Daniel) Murphy, *Diplomat among Warriors*, (Garden City, N.Y. : Doubleday, 1964), 386.

¹⁸⁹ Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*.

¹⁹⁰ House of Commons, ‘Suez Canal - Volume 558: Debated on Wednesday 12 September 1956’, Hansard, 12 September 1956.

¹⁹¹ Department of State, ‘Memorandum of a Conversation Between the Egyptian Ambassador (Hussein) and the Secretary of State’, Office of the Historian, 13 September 1956.

¹⁹² Lloyd Selwyn, *Suez 1956*, 162.

¹⁹³ John Foster Dulles, ‘Letter From Secretary of State Dulles to Foreign Secretary Lloyd’, Office of the Historian, 15 October 1956.

had read as an expression of allied concern had become an institutional recognition of Egyptian control.

SCUA was the precise point during the Suez Crisis at which the moral dimension of the “Special Relationship” myth ceased to function as a practical instrument of British policy. Eden had reached for it through the wartime mythology: the Munich analogy, the totalitarian Nasser, the claim on a shared duty to resist aggression on behalf of the liberal order. He read the Association as the moral compact in operation, the institutional proof that Anglo-American invocations of “common principles” still translated, as they had 1941¹⁹⁴ and 1949,¹⁹⁵ into common action. The Association’s founding vocabulary lent itself to this reading. Like the United Nations a decade earlier, SCUA was constituted at multilateral conference in London, framed in the language of international law and treaty rights, and presented as a joint Anglo-American initiative.¹⁹⁶ Eden could plausibly read it in the same light: the Atlantic Charter’s principles re-expressed in an institutional form. SCUA’s collapse showed that that resemblance was rhetorical only.

With the diplomatic route now effectively closed, Eden was left with a choice between acquiescence and unilateral action. He chose the latter. Having failed to enlist America through the myth’s moral language, Eden resolved to act without her. In doing so, he destroyed the very narrative he had been invoking.

v. *Sèvres, Collusion, and the Destruction of the Moral Narrative*

The decision that would prove fatal to the Special Relationship, and to Eden’s political career, was taken in conditions of deliberate deception. On 22-24 October 1956, at a private villa in Sèvres outside Paris, Eden’s senior emissaries concluded a tripartite agreement with France and Israel.¹⁹⁷ Under the terms of the resulting Protocol, Israel would launch a military attack on Egypt on 29 October; Britain and France would then issue an ultimatum to both parties to withdraw ten miles either side of the Suez Canal, knowing that Egypt would refuse, and Anglo-French military forces would intervene under the publicly asserted pretext of separating the

¹⁹⁴ “The Atlantic Charter”, NATO, 1941

¹⁹⁵ “The North Atlantic Treaty”, NATO, 1949.

¹⁹⁶ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 197-199.

¹⁹⁷ Lloyd Selwyn, *Suez 1956: A Personal Account.*, (BCA, 1978), 180.

belligerents and protecting the Canal.¹⁹⁸ British diplomat Anthony Nutting's and Foreign Minister Selwyn Lloyd's accounts confirm the substance of the agreement and the elaborate secrecy surrounding it. Nutting records that the negotiations were withheld from Cabinet and from the Foreign Office's senior officials.¹⁹⁹ The entire operation was designed to achieve what could not be done through open declaration of intent, through the fabrication of Britain and France acting as disinterested peacekeepers. Most strikingly, on the evening of 24 October Eden, dismayed that the collusion had been recorded in writing, dispatched Patrick Dean and his Private Secretary Donald Logan back to Paris with instructions to retrieve and destroy all copies of the Protocol, a request Logan would later recount in his own published account of the meetings.²⁰⁰ The French copy of the document, the Protocol of Sèvres, would survive to define the historical record of the Suez Crisis, and its eventual declassification would prove false everything that Eden subsequently claimed.²⁰¹

The collusion of Sèvres was a catastrophe for the myth, a catastrophe that preceded and determined the military one. The "Special Relationship" myth rested, above all, on the moral narrative: the claim that British, and by extension, Anglo-American, foreign policy was distinguished from that of rival and lesser powers by its commitment to international law, democratic transparency, and institutional legitimacy. The moral narrative was of the Atlantic Charter, of the Truman Doctrine, of NATO, and of every subsequent formulation of the Western liberal order that both countries had jointly sponsored and jointly invoked. The Sèvres Protocol constituted the complete negation of this moral claim. Eden's statement to the House of Commons on 20 December, that "but to say [...] that Her Majesty's Government were engaged in some dishonourable conspiracy is completely untrue, and I most emphatically deny it,"²⁰² and Lloyd's on the 31 October that "there was no prior agreement between us [UK and Israel],"²⁰³ were lies that subsequent evidence would expose. Britain was not acting as custodian of international order.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 196.

¹⁹⁹ Anthony Nutting, *No End of a Lesson; the Story of Suez*, (New York, C. N. Potter, 1967), 110.

²⁰⁰ Donald Logan and James S. Sutterlin, 'Interview with Sir Donald Logan', with Yale University (New Haven, Conn.), UN, 24.

²⁰¹ Avi Shlaim, 'The Protocol of Sèvres, 1956: Anatomy of a War Plot', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 73, no. 3 (1997): 509–30.

²⁰² 'Israel And Egypt (Anglo-French Ultimatum) - Hansard - UK Parliament', 20 December 1956.

²⁰³ 'Middle East (Situation) - Hansard - UK Parliament', 31 October 1956.

The Israeli attack on Egypt on 29 October triggered the Anglo-French ultimatum the following day. Eisenhower's response was furious. Addressing the American people on 31 October, the President placed the United States in explicit opposition to it. "I do not believe that another instrument of injustice—war—is the remedy for these wrongs. There can be no peace," Eisenhower declared, "without law. And there can be no law if we work to invoke one code of international conduct for those who oppose us and another for our friends."²⁰⁴ His conclusion was devastating. It denied the exceptionalism that the "Special Relationship" myth had always claimed, asserted that American commitment to international order was unconditional, applicable to allies no less than adversaries, and implicitly constituted the United States as the enforcer of the moral standards that Britain had helped to construct and was now violating. The moral narrative of the "Special Relationship" was being turned against Britain.

Eisenhower's private register in this period was, if anything, more absolute than his public one, but more so located in communications to his own government rather than in sent correspondence to Eden. The single letter Eisenhower despatched to London on 30 October, was studiously restrained. "I should like to ask your help in clearing up my understanding as to exactly what is happening between us and our European allies — especially between us, the French and yourselves,"²⁰⁵ Eisenhower wrote, asking Eden for clarification. The President urged "that the UK and the US" should "quickly and clearly lay out their present views and intentions before each other," lest they find themselves "powerless to act in concert because of misunderstanding."²⁰⁶ Scott Lucas's observation was that "the letter concealed the fury of Eisenhower."²⁰⁷ A subsequent message on the same day conveyed the President's "deep concern"²⁰⁸ at the prospect of military action, and at least two

²⁰⁴ 'Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Developments in Eastern Europe and the Middle East', 31 October 1956.

²⁰⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, 'Message from President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Eden (ii)', Office of the Historian, 30 October 1956.

²⁰⁶ Eisenhower, 'Message from President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Eden (ii)'.

²⁰⁷ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 206.

²⁰⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, 'Message from President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Eden and Prime Minister Mollet', 30 October 1956.

further drafts were held by Eisenhower²⁰⁹ at Foster Dulles's request,²¹⁰ ultimately suppressed. Eden was permitted to receive only the most measured expressions of American disquiet. This estrangement was the prelude to a diplomatic blackout that would follow, one which would strip Britain of its allied status altogether.

The conversations in the White House, however, were unrestrained. Goodpaster's staff memorandum records an Eisenhower whose contempt for the entire enterprise was undisguised. The President wondered aloud whether the "the hand of Churchill" lay behind an action conducted in what he called "mid-Victorian style," and dismissed Britain as an unworthy and unreliable ally," and observed that the necessity of supporting such allies "might not be as great as they believed."²¹¹ Foster Dulles, briefing the President on the same day, described the Anglo-French ultimatum "about as crude and brutal as anything he has ever seen," with Eisenhower agreeing that "it was pretty rough."²¹² By the afternoon meeting, after the State Department had confirmed Britain's complicity in the Israeli attack, the President was "especially bitter".²¹³ He refused to convene any rescue effort for the British economy, declaring that allies who put the United States in a hole who not now expect to be extracted from it, and concluded with the phrase "I want [Eden] to know that we are a Government of honour".²¹⁴ "Nothing," Eisenhower stated to his own cabinet, "justifies double crossing us."²¹⁵ Britain had become the perpetrator of an act of bad faith against the United States itself; no longer a partner.

From Allen Dulles, John Foster Dulles's brother, this warranted a comparison of the British to the Soviet Union: "How can anything be done about the Russians [...] when our own allies are guilty of exactly similar acts of aggression?"²¹⁶ His brother agreed, and was furious "at the damage to the Western cause against the

²⁰⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, 'Draft Message from President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Eden', 30 October 1956.

²¹⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, 'Draft Message from President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Eden (ii)', 1 November 1956.

²¹¹ Andrew Jackson Goodpaster, 'Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, October 30, 1956, 10:06–10:55 a.m.', Office of the Historian, 30 October 1956.

²¹² Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 262.

²¹³ Ibid, 261.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Robin Renwick, *Fighting with Allies: America and Britain in Peace and at War*, (New York : Times Books, 1996), 216.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

Soviet intervention in Hungary,”²¹⁷ citing that it was a “mockery” for the British to admonish the Soviet Union when they were committing an act far worse against international law.²¹⁸ This was a comparison that would have been unthinkable months earlier. That the custodians of the liberal order were now being measured against its most committed adversary was bleak; the moral dimension of the myth was under the greatest strain since its origination.

The decisive blow was silence from the US administration. The Eisenhower administration imposed a diplomatic “blackout”²¹⁹ upon direct contact with the British Prime Minister. What contributed to a harder US line was the hospitalisation of John Foster Dulles on the 3 November 1956, which elevated the influence of Herbert Hoover Jr, the acting secretary of state,²²⁰ and George Humphrey, the Treasury secretary, within the administration.²²¹ Both favoured a firm stance against British and French intervention, particularly through the use of financial pressure.²²² When Eden, on 7 November, telephoned Washington under the pre-text of congratulating Eisenhower on his re-election the previous evening, as well as to propose an immediate Anglo-American summit, Eisenhower’s first instinct was conciliation.²²³ Within the hour, Hoover had overruled him on the grounds that “the American government must be very careful to avoid the appearance of teaming up with the British and French governments.”²²⁴ Dulles, via telephone, was in agreement. Eisenhower telephoned Eden to say that he could not accommodate the meeting, and had encountered “opposition about the timing.”²²⁵ Secretary William Macomber’s memorandum of the President’s discussion with Foster Dulles in hospital that afternoon records the price the State Department had imposed, that any

²¹⁷ The Soviet invasion of Hungary commenced on 4 November 1956, concurrent with the Anglo-French assault on Egypt. The simultaneity of the two crises was catastrophic for Britain, as the Suez intervention deprived the Western alliance of the moral authority to condemn Soviet action in Hungary. See Johanna Granville, *The First Domino: International Decision Making During the Hungarian Crisis of 1956* (Texas A&M University Press, 2004).

²¹⁸ Ibid, 217.

²¹⁹ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 300.

²²⁰ Kyle, *Suez*, 427.

²²¹ Renwick, *Fighting with Allies*, 217.

²²² Kunz, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis*, 140.

²²³ Diane B. Kunz, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 135.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Anthony Eden and Dwight D. Eisenhower, ‘Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between President Eisenhower in Washington and Prime Minister Eden in London, November 7, 1956, 10:27 a.m.’.

subsequent meeting between the President and the Prime Minister would “be contingent on the British and French having previously gotten their troops out of Egypt.”²²⁶ The personal channel through which the “Special Relationship” had operated, the channel of wartime camaraderie, had been formally severed, and would not be restored to Anthony Eden in his lifetime as Prime Minister.

What remained, then, was a Britain militarily overextended, diplomatically isolated, and, as the following weeks would demonstrate, financially exposed. The myth would be repaired, if at all, through submission. What it came down to, in the end, was the pound sterling.

C. The Economic Weapon

i. The Disunited Nations

Operation Musketeer, which began on 31 October, with RAF bombing raids on Egyptian airfields,²²⁷ followed by Anglo-French paratrooper landings at El Gamil on 5 November,²²⁸ followed by the assault on Port Said on 6 November,²²⁹ was terminated by the combined force of American financial pressure and UN diplomatic isolation. Coercion operated through these two channels simultaneously. In the United Nations Security Council, the United States drafted a ceasefire resolution that was vetoed by the UK and France,²³⁰ placing Washington in formal alignment with Moscow and the Afro-Asian bloc against its closest ally in a spectacle of diplomatic isolation that the “Special Relationship” myth had been specifically constructed to render unimaginable. The resulting deadlock led to Resolution 119, which transferred the issue to the General Assembly (S/RES/119), which the UK and France also voted against.²³¹

This diplomatic isolation was compounded by the defection of the Commonwealth, the very community of nations that Churchill’s civilisational frame had denominated as the “English-Speaking Peoples”. Canada’s response to Operation Musketeer was drastic. Prime Minister Louis St Laurent “was in an

²²⁶ William B. Macomber, ‘Memorandum of a Conversation, Secretary Dulles’ Room, Walter Reed Hospital, Washington, November 7, 1956, 11:10 a.m.’, 7 November 1956.

²²⁷ Kyle, *Suez* 373-4.

²²⁸ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 289.

²²⁹ Ibid. See Appendix F, Figure 10 for a visual of the assault on Port Said.

²³⁰ *Security Council official records, 11th year: 749th meeting, 30 October 1956, New York* (UN, 1956).

²³¹ UN. Security Council (11th year: 1956), ed., *Resolution 119 (1956)*.

uncharacteristic rage”,²³² later public condemning the Anglo-French action, while his Secretary for State for External Affairs, Lester B. Pearson, proposed at the emergency session of the UN General Assembly on 3-4 November 1956 the creation of a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) to supervise the cessation of hostilities and facilitate Anglo-French withdrawal.²³³ Pearson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the initiative in 1957.²³⁴ While Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies, who had led the five-nation delegation to Cairo in September, expressed support for Operation Musketeer, it was isolated and to his own detriment. The Australian press was brutally critical of the Prime Minister,²³⁵ and Menzies’s own cabinet opposed him.²³⁶ The civilisational frame had been constructed on the premise that the “English-Speaking Peoples” constituted a natural community of shared values and common purpose. At Suez, one member was internally divided in its support for Britain. The other had, in effect, sided with Washington against London.

ii. *Sterling*

What truly motivated the Brits to halt their efforts, though, was money. In the currency markets, a run on sterling threatened to destroy Britain’s foreign exchange reserves at a rate that made continued military operations untenable within days. The figure at the centre of the financial crisis was Harold Macmillan, an actor who will be central to the “Special Relationship” in the next chapter. For now, though, he was the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He was in fact the Cabinet member most responsible for the decision to use force and the instrument of its financial termination. Macmillan had been among the most bellicose voices in the Egypt Committee throughout the autumn of 1956. Writing in his diary on 18 August, he expressed the conviction that “if Nasser ‘gets away with it’ we are done for. The whole Arab world will despise us... it may well be the end of British influence and strength forever,”²³⁷ and, if force was not used, he pledged to resign.

²³² Kyle, *Suez*, 393.

²³³ Michael K. Carroll, *Pearson’s Peacekeepers: Canada and the United Nations Emergency Force, 1956-67* (UBC Press, 2009), xix.

²³⁴ ‘Nobel Peace Prize 1957’, Norwegian Nobel Institute.

²³⁵ Kyle, *Suez*, 392-3

²³⁶ Alan Watt, *The Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy 1938-1965*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967), 303.

²³⁷ Alistair Horne, *Macmillan: 1894-1956* (Macmillan, 1988).

Macmillan attended the Annual Meeting of the IMF in Washington, September 1956, and sounded out Secretary of the Treasury George Humphrey on American financial support for sterling.²³⁸ Humphrey gave no explicit promises. But Macmillan reminded by Dulles of how “he and the President had helped” manage the international situation during Eden’s election campaign of May 1955. Encouraged to “raise the question of loan payments” and a broader financial package²³⁹ by both Dulles and Humphrey, he appeared confident in the “Special Relationship” and financial support after Eisenhower’s presidential election.²⁴⁰ Furthermore, he later records in his memoirs meeting with head of the IMF, Eugene Black, with “no hint, at this time, of any difficulty being put in our way, or of financial backing to Britain not being available in full, whatever the circumstances.”²⁴¹

The Bank of England’s reserves had been draining steadily since July, but the opening of Anglo-French military operations on 31 October accelerated the process into a crisis.²⁴² By 6 November, on the day Eden’s ceasefire was announced, Macmillan declared that £100 million of foreign exchange reserves had been lost in the preceding week,²⁴³ and that sterling could not be held without American assistance.

The precision of this figure has been contested in historical literature. Diane Kunz’s archival reconstruction demonstrates that the total loss for that week was in fact £30.4 million,²⁴⁴ suggesting that Macmillan’s presentation of the crisis to Cabinet was, at minimum, selectively framed. Whether he was accurately reporting an intolerable situation or deploying financial data to force an outcome he had concluded was necessary, the intended effect was achieved. It was because Macmillan had been one of the voices pushing hardest for an aggressive response to Nasser that his words were taken seriously, and his reversal carried the weight needed to break the Cabinet’s resolve. The ceasefire came into effect at midnight that night.²⁴⁵

²³⁸ Harold Macmillan, *The Macmillan Diaries*, (London : Macmillan, 2003), 605.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ James M. Boughton, *IMF Staff Papers Vol. 48 No. 3, 2001*, 437.

²⁴¹ Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm, 1956-1959*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1971), 135.

²⁴² James M. Boughton, ‘Was Suez in 1956 the First Financial Crisis of the Twenty-First Century?’, *Finance & Development*, *Finance & Development* 38, no. 003 (2001).

²⁴³ Thorpe, *Eden*, 524.

²⁴⁴ Kunz, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis*, 132.

²⁴⁵ ‘DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS (Hansard, 6 November 1956)’, 6 November 1956.

iii. *The IMF and Rescue*

The ceasefire of 6 November did not terminate American financial pressure, however. Washington had drawn a deliberate distinction between the cessation of hostilities, which Britain had conceded, and the full withdrawal of the forces from Egypt, which they had not.²⁴⁶ The Eden government intended to keep British forces in Egypt, where Eisenhower wanted them out. Between the ceasefire and troop withdrawal, the pressure on sterling intensified. The pound came under acute speculation in the last week of November, with reserves losses of \$48 million on 20–21 November alone, and oil companies, anticipating devaluation, dumping their sterling holdings.²⁴⁷ Britain required a package of up to \$1.3 billion to stabilise sterling.²⁴⁸ The United States controlled, through its weighted voting share in the IMF Board, the effective outcome of any British drawing application. Humphrey's position, confirmed to British Ambassador Harold Caccia on 27 November, was firm. The United States would not budge until Britain had "shown in a way which the world could accept, that [Britain] was conforming to rather than defying the United Nations."²⁴⁹ No financial assistance would be forthcoming until a definitive statement of withdrawal had been made.

Britain's capacity to sustain any independent military posture was extinguished by American hostility. The "Special Relationship" myth had always managed the reality of British financial dependence within a vocabulary of partnership, such as with Lend-Lease and the Marshall Plan, but the IMF episode dissolved this notion. Because Britain had betrayed the moral narrative of the myth, it was being told, through financial coercion, that its strategic autonomy was conditioned absolutely on American approval. The Barthesian myth of co-leadership had been reduced to its material foundations, and those foundations were not shared. They belonged to Washington. Thus, the British withdrew.

The denouement arrived with abruptness. Humphrey, meeting British representatives in December, swept aside procedural discussion and proposed the full

²⁴⁶ Kunz, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis*, 143.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 145-6

²⁴⁸ Russell Baker Special To the New York Times, 'BRITAIN GRANTED 1.3 BILLION CREDIT BY WORLD FUND; QUICK ACTION DUE', Archives, *The New York Times*, 11 December 1956.

²⁴⁹ Kunz, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis*, 148.

\$1.3 billion package, only once withdrawal was underway.²⁵⁰ The United States had administered a lesson, confirmed its dominance, and then restored sufficient British financial credibility to permit the relationship's continuation. Macmillan's announcement of the November reserve losses to the Commons on 4 December, simultaneously with the IMF drawing application, was the public presentation of this settlement.²⁵¹ The parliamentary statement was a concoction of humiliation and relief.

iv. Reaction, Resentment, and the Civilisational Frame's Survival

The American exercise of financial and diplomatic coercion produced a surge of anti-American sentiment in Britain. The American Embassy in London reported to Washington in December 1956 that not since the early years of the Second World War had "politically interested Britons been so wrought up over any foreign affairs issue."²⁵² A motion was signed by 130 Conservative MPs "deploring the attitude of the US, which is gravely endangering the Atlantic alliance".²⁵³ The Conservative press had, for most of November, maintained the impression that Washington was withholding oil shipments from Europe until British and French forces withdrew, which continued to circulate long after serious papers had corrected it.²⁵⁴ The "peak of resentment," the Embassy judged, was reached in the week of 25 November (the peak of the Sterling crisis and American refusal to support the pound) when the Conservative press subjected the United States to a sustained assault for what it characterised as the persecution of an "erstwhile" ally.²⁵⁵

The anti-American reaction was not confined to those who had supported the intervention. Even among Britons who had opposed the military operation on legal or moral grounds, the manner of American disengagement with the financial ultimatum, the diplomatic "blackout", and the refusal to receive Eden, generated a resentment.²⁵⁶ One could simultaneously conclude that Eden had been wrong and that American

²⁵⁰ Kunz, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis*, 153-4.

²⁵¹ 'Gold And Dollar Reserves And Economic Situation' Hansard, UK Parliament', 4 December 1956.

²⁵² Winthrop W. Aldrich, 'Telegram From the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State', Office of the Historian, 8 December 1956.

²⁵³ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, 314.

²⁵⁴ Aldrich, 'Telegram From the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State (i)'.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ John Hay Whitney, 'Telegram From the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State (ii)', Office of the Historian, 7 March 1957.

had been merciless. This was a particular bitterness of mythological betrayal. Britain felt betrayed by America precisely because it had believed, with such conviction, that a partnership of the kind the myth described existed. The myth's power was demonstrated, perversely, by the intensity of the reaction against its violation.

D. Eden's Resignation and the Myth's First Repair: Towards Nassau

i. *Operation Scapegoat*

Eden resigned on 9 January 1957, citing ill health.²⁵⁷ His biliary condition had been a chronic impairment throughout his tenure. His dependence on amphetamines and sedatives had induced insomnia, mood swings, and impaired judgement,²⁵⁸ which had attended the most consequential decisions of his premiership. Truly, though, his resignation was due to the destruction of his political authority that he had earned through his handling of Suez. His Cabinet had fractured, his parliamentary majority was publicly strained,²⁵⁹ and the collusion at Sèvres that he had denied before the Commons was a matter of rumoured knowledge awaiting documentary confirmation.²⁶⁰ The resignation document he signed for the Cabinet confessed of his dependence on stimulants, but denied that they had affected his judgement during Suez.²⁶¹

Recent scholarship has complicated the conventional picture of Eden's Suez calculations as straightforwardly mad and delusional, as is believed in order to sustain the myth. Barnaby Crowcroft has demonstrated that Eden's expectation of finding viable Egyptian partners to fill Nasser's position (once disposed of) was not without foundation.²⁶² His aim was not only to retake the Canal but achieve regime change, with "the removal of Nasser and the installation in Egypt of a regime less hostile to the West."²⁶³ This could also be read through the guise of the moral dimension, in seeking to rid of totalitarian Nasser, but it adds to a more nuanced

²⁵⁷ Thorpe, *Eden*, 546.

²⁵⁸ David Owen, *In Sickness and in Power: Illness in Heads of Government during the Last 100 Years*, (London: Methuen, 2011), 119-121.

²⁵⁹ Thorpe, *Eden*, 499, 531-540.

²⁶⁰ Kyle, *Suez*, 564.

²⁶¹ Thorpe, *Eden*, 546-7.

²⁶² Barnaby Crowcroft, 'EGYPT'S OTHER NATIONALISTS AND THE SUEZ CRISIS OF 1956', *The Historical Journal* 59, no. 1 (2016): 253-85.

²⁶³ Peter G. Boyle, *The Eden-Eisenhower Correspondence, 1955-1957* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2006), 158-9.

picture that the myth subsequently represses in order to make Eden scapegoat and move on from the rupture.

The irony of the succession was that the man who replaced Eden was Harold Macmillan, the Chancellor of the Exchequer who had been the loudest advocate of force in July, and the instrument of financial capitulation in November. Labour Shadow Chancellor Harold Wilson put it best: Macmillan was “first in, first out,” of the Suez Crisis.²⁶⁴ The selection process produced Macmillan as Eden’s successor by near-unanimity, with the endorsement of Churchill and the appointment of the Queen.²⁶⁵

As will be detailed in the proceeding chapter, Macmillan’s first and most urgent task was the reconstruction of the Special Relationship. His wartime acquaintance with Eisenhower during the Mediterranean campaign²⁶⁶ gave him a personal channel that Eden had never quite managed to cultivate successfully. As early as March 1957, Macmillan met Eisenhower in Bermuda,²⁶⁷ restoring the summit-level bilateral contact that had been suspended since before the ceasefire. Churchill, writing to Eisenhower in late November 1956, had already provided foundations for the reconstruction, in urging that “the theme of Anglo-American alliance is more important today than at any time since the war.”²⁶⁸ The myth was being reassembled before Eden had even resigned.²⁶⁹

ii. Why Both Parties Needed the Myth to Continue

The mythological operation performed by Eden’s departure and Macmillan’s succession was Barthesian. Eden’s fall transformed the history of Suez: the collusion, the deception of Parliament, the financial capitulation, into nature. The relationship had been damaged not because its structural premises were false, but because one flawed statesman had misread its terms. Remove the statesman, and the relationship could resume. This was the myth’s most powerful resilience mechanism. It had the capacity to absorb individual catastrophe as personal failure, and to reconstitute itself

²⁶⁴ Horne, *Macmillan*, 441.

²⁶⁵ Thorpe, *Eden*, 547.

²⁶⁶ Horne, *Macmillan*, 158.

²⁶⁷ Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan, and the Problem of Nasser*, 120-1.

²⁶⁸ Horne, *Macmillan*, 452.

²⁶⁹ See Appendix F, Figures 11 and 12 for a political cartoon foreshadowing Eden’s “doom”, and Eden’s departure from Downing Street.

around a new protagonist committed to its performance. The relationship had survived Suez because both parties retained an investment in its continuation. Britain needed the myth because without it, the reality of dependence was unmanageable. That much is obvious.

The United States also needed it, in ways more that are more nuanced. The most immediate was strategic. The Eisenhower administration had moved swiftly, even before the December financial settlement, to formulate what would become the Eisenhower Doctrine: a Middle Eastern policy predicated on filling, as Dulles put it, “the vacuum of power which the British filled for a century.”²⁷⁰ Yet the assumption of that role required a junior partner whose continued alignment could be relied upon, particularly as the Cold War theatre expanded into Asia and Africa. A permanently estranged Britain would have been a weakness to American leadership; a fractured Western alliance. The Eisenhower Doctrine and the IMF rescue were therefore also a single integrated policy: discipline followed by reconstruction, designed to retain Britain as a willing subordinate within an American-led order.

The second American need was more psychological. Kunz observes that the American foreign policy in the Eisenhower-Dulles era was characterised by “an air of moral righteousness and hypocrisy that permeated all administration statements on the Suez Crisis,” with officials convinced that their decisions were “made for reasons of principle, not realpolitik.”²⁷¹ This conviction permitted administration officials to reconcile their opposition to the Anglo-French intervention with their concurrent sponsorship of CIA-directed coups in Iran and Guatemala — operations which, Kunz notes, were “prima facie strikingly similar to the Suez imbroglio.”²⁷² By infusing their policy stance with moral superiority, American could truly hold the dominant position in the relationship. The myth was needed for strategy, but also for self-conception.

Thirdly, a recurring theme of the myth (that was not exclusive to Suez) was the need for legitimacy. Christopher Hitchens argues that the United States required Britain not as an equal partner but as “self-conscious[ly] subordinat[e],”²⁷³ the diplomatic and cultural intermediary through which American power could be

²⁷⁰ Kunz, *Economic Diplomacy*, 159.

²⁷¹ Ibid, 155

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Hitchens, *Blood, Class, and Empire: The Enduring Anglo-American Relationship*, 36.

exercised in a vocabulary that did not announce itself as imperial. Britain provided the institutional history, the linguistic register, and the civilisational credentials that legitimised American hegemony to present itself as the natural continuation of a shared Atlantic tradition. There is a certain weight to an America that succeeds Britain. America's oldest geography has ghosts of colonial Britain: New York, New Hampshire, Virginia, Maryland. Parliamentary procedure, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, The Rhodes Scholarship.²⁷⁴ The King James Bible, Shakespeare—all things ceremonial and symbolic, inherited. As Hitchens aptly identifies: “The Americans were to supply the capital, and the British were to provide the class.”²⁷⁵ Again, in Suez, the civilisational outweighs the moral and the imperial-historical.

This is why the “Special Relationship” could survive. Myth allows a level of negotiation above the material, a flexibility empowered by symbolism and ceremony. In operating at this level, and with Eden as a casualty, the myth could move onto its next chapter: Skybolt and the Nassau Negotiation. From the ruins of Eden's premiership, Macmillan would construct the myth's next iteration, and would do so, with considerable skill, for the better part of a decade.

iii. Macmillan Masters the Myth During and After Suez

The third mythological dimension, the imperial-historical, operated throughout the Suez Crisis as more of a background condition rather than an explicit topic of debate. Though the moral frame was invoked openly by both sides, the imperial-historical was largely unnamed, apart from notably in Eisenhower's Oval Office discussions. Its function was, and is, to organise the underlying assumption about what Britain was and what the United States was becoming. By 1956, this assumption was well underway. Britain had withdrawn from India in 1947, from Palestine in 1948, from the Sudan in early 1956,²⁷⁶ and the Suez Canal Zone itself in 1954 under an agreement Eden had personally negotiated.²⁷⁷ The trajectory of imperial transmission, from Britain to the United States as the dominant Western

²⁷⁴ The Rhodes Scholarship was established in 1902 explicitly foster Anglo-American elite solidarity through shared Oxford education. Rhodes's will described the purpose in terms of the English-speaking peoples. See Kenny, *The History of the Rhodes Trust*, 1-24.

²⁷⁵ Hitchens, *Blood, Class, and Empire*, 42.

²⁷⁶ John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World*, Making of 20th Century (Bloomsbury Academic, 1988) Chapters 4 and 5.

²⁷⁷ Kyle, *Suez*, 41-60.

power in the Middle East and globally, was in place. The “Special Relationship” myth was the lens through which this transmission was made possible.

This is the key to understanding why Suez strained the relationship so severely. Not only was the moral frame explicitly violated, but also the imperial-historical. The imperial-historical accommodated Britain’s decline by framing imperial decline as the orderly passing of responsibility to a kindred successor. The frame functioned because it implied imperial *transmission*, not imperial *assertation*. Eden’s error was to confuse this. The intervention against Nasser was on the basis of imperial assertion, the recovery of a position lost, the demonstration that Britain could still act as a great power in its own right. Eden was thus violating the terms on which the imperial-historical operated. Eisenhower’s complaint about “mid-Victorian style” captured this, that Britain had attempted to be imperial in a manner appropriate to the previous century, at the expense of the new arrangement.

As stated, Macmillan’s Greece-to-Rome analogy is the imperial-historical frame aptly articulated. It accepted the transmission of material power and refigured the transmission as the inheritance of civilisational tutorship. Where Eden had attempted to assert imperial power and lost it, Macmillan knew that he was conceding imperial power in that statement, and in doing so, recovered influence.

What is striking is the dimension of the myth that neither side deployed against each other. The American condemnation, public and private, was conducted exclusively in the register of international law and moral principle. Eisenhower’s broadcast invoked the “code of international conduct”²⁷⁸; Dulles described the Anglo-French ultimatum as a violation of allied principle; Allen Dulles compared the British conduct to that of the Soviet Union.²⁷⁹ Even Eisenhower’s most cutting private remarks, such as the operation being conducted in “mid-Victorian style”²⁸⁰, targeted the imperial-historical frame, not the civilisational one. At no point did the American administration suggest that the “English-Speaking Peoples” no longer constituted a community of shared political identity, or that Britain had ceased to

²⁷⁸ ‘Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Developments in Eastern Europe and the Middle East’, 31 October 1956.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Andrew Jackson Goodpaster, ‘Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, October 30, 1956, 10:06–10:55 a.m.’, Office of the Historian, 30 October 1956.

belong to the Atlantic civilisation. The accusation was that Britain had betrayed shared principles, not that it had become a different kind of polity.

The British behaved similarly. Even at the height of British resentment in late November, when supporters of the Conservative government subjugated the United States to what the American Embassy described as a “pent-up floods of recrimination and abuse”²⁸¹, the charge against Washington was one of betrayal, not of civilisational estrangement. Britain accused American of having broken the bonds of partnership; it did not accuse of America of having become, in a deeper sense, a different sort of nation. In Eden’s post-resignation memoir, he continued to write the United States in the vocabulary of allied kinship rather than civilisational rupture, locating his quarrel in the misjudgement of particular American statesmen rather than in any reassessment of the Atlantic community as such.²⁸² The civilisational frame was, in effect, the red line that the dispute was not permitted to cross. The moral narrative could be turned against Eden, the imperial-historical frame could be invoked against British conduct, but the underlying premise that Britain and American belonged to a common political, linguistic, and cultural civilisation remained untouched by either side. This is the dimension of the myth that needed to survive in order for the relationship to be repairable. In the autumn of 1956, both sides were operating with one eye on the reconstruction that would have to follow. The civilisational frame, thus, would be the foundation for the myth during the Macmillan-Kennedy years.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Eden, *Full Circle*, 557, 540, 649.

Chapter III: Kennedy's Camelot and the Knights of the Nassau Table (1956–63)

From the ruins of the Suez Crisis, we open on Nassau, the Bahamas. What could have been the nail in the coffin of the "Special Relationship" was in turn salvaged by a player from the last chapter: Harold Macmillan, and his contemporary, President John F. Kennedy. In this chapter, the tide is turned on a nuclear near-disaster through the most powerful mythological frame: the civilisational.

The Suez Crisis had not destroyed the "Special Relationship" but exposed the conditions on which the mythology depended. The two frames which had been most contested in the Crisis were the moral and the imperial-historical narratives. The moral narrative had come out mostly unscathed, having been recovered through the reframing of Suez as the fault of a singular individual—Eden—as opposed to the moral failure of Britain. The imperial-historical narrative resumed, with Britain out of Egypt and nursing their wounds.

Myths, in the Barthesian sense, do not collapse when contradicted. They simply shift to a different justification drawn from the same underlying belief system. The argument of this chapter is that this is what the Skybolt-Polaris episode of 1962 illustrates. It constitutes the most consequential act of mythological repair in the post-war history of Anglo-American relations. It was an episode in which a structural humiliation, Britain's discovery that the centrepiece of its independent nuclear deterrent had been cancelled by an American Defence Secretary without formal prior consultation, was recoded. In the space of three days at Nassau and the months that followed, the episode was reconfigured into a demonstration of unique, civilisationally rooted intimacy. Where Suez had ruptured the myth, Nassau reconstituted it. Where Suez had failed to deploy the moral frame, Nassau pivoted to the civilisational and cultural frames, which proved more durable.

A. Kinsmen and Statesmen: The Interpersonal Post-Suez Relationship

i. *Kennedy's Anglophilia*

The repair was more easily made, in the first instance, by an extraordinary cultural disposition on the American side. At the time of Skybolt, John F. Kennedy was President of the United States. John F. Kennedy's Anglophilia was a deep and biographical disposition. Born in 1917 to Joseph P. Kennedy and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, the young Jack had moved from Boston to Princes Gate, Westminster, London in 1938, when his father was appointed United States Ambassador to the UK.²⁸³ The formative years of his late adolescence were lived inside the British political establishment on the eve of war, and touring Europe in research for his thesis.²⁸⁴ He spent the summer of his sophomore year working at the US embassy in London.²⁸⁵ He attended his father's diplomatic functions, was present in the Strangers' Gallery of the House of Commons on 3 September when Neville Chamberlain announced the British declaration of war on Germany.²⁸⁶ His Harvard senior thesis, polished by his father's publicist Arthur Krock and published in 1940 as 'Why England Slept', was structured around a sustained engagement with the British political tradition.²⁸⁷ Though in part a criticism of British appeasement, the title itself was a deliberate echo of Churchill's 'While England Slept', and the book's argument drew its principal exempla from the British case.²⁸⁸

What truly powered his Anglophilia though, was his love of literature. Kennedy's reading list, which was compiled by his aide Dave Powers and submitted by the Kennedy library to journalists in the years after his assassination, reads as a curriculum in British patrician political culture. From David Cecil's 'The Young Melbourne' to Churchill's 'Marlborough: His Life and Times' to Duff Cooper's 'Talleyrand', to Ian Fleming's 'From Russia with Love', Kennedy's love for British

²⁸³ Chris Matthews, *Jack Kennedy: Elusive Hero* (Simon and Schuster, 2011), 33-4.

²⁸⁴ Michael E. Meagher and Larry D. Gragg, *John F. Kennedy: A Biography*, Greenwood Biographies (Greenwood, 2011), 14.

²⁸⁵ Robert Dallek, *John F. Kennedy: An Unfinished Life, 1917-1963*, (London : Penguin, 2004), .

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 58. See Appendix F, Figure 13 for a visual of young JFK on the way to the Commons to hear the declaration of war.

²⁸⁷ Meagher and Gragg, *John F. Kennedy*, 18-19.

²⁸⁸ John D. Fair, 'The Intellectual JFK: Lessons in Statesmanship from British History', *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 1 (2006): 119-42.

literature left a strong impression on him.²⁸⁹ When Kennedy was courting Jacqueline Bouvier in the early 1950's, the two books he pressed upon her were 'Pilgrim's Way' and 'The Young Melbourne'.²⁹⁰ The first was an elegy for the Edwardian patrician class consumed by the First World War, the second a portrait of Whig aristocratic public service in the early nineteenth century. Churchill's portrayal of Raymond Asquith, lost on the Somme, contained the lines Kennedy was reported to have repeated for the rest of his life: "The War which found the measure of so many never got to the bottom of him... He went to his fate cool, poised, resolute, matter-of-fact, debonair."²⁹¹ The parallel with Kennedy's own later self-presentation requires little elaboration.

Kennedy's Anglophilia was not limited to literature, however. To say that Joseph Kennedy had societal ambitions, especially for his time as ambassador in London, would be an understatement.²⁹² Jack's time in the UK allowed him to enter circles of high societies in Britain, developing a "taste" for them.²⁹³ Furthermore, the Kennedy became linked to the British political class through dynastic and personal connections. In May 1944, Kennedy's sister Kathleen married William Cavendish, Marquess of Hartington, heir to the tenth Duke of Devonshire.²⁹⁴ Through this, the Kennedys were connected by affinity to the Cavendish family. Through *them*, they were tenuously connected to Harold Macmillan, whose wife Lady Dorothy was the ninth Duke's daughter, and Hartington's aunt.²⁹⁵ Closer still was the friendship of David Ormsby-Gore, whom Kennedy had known from his London years. When Macmillan appointed Ormsby-Gore Ambassador to Washington in 1961 (a deliberate move of the Prime Minister) Kennedy received him with familial cordiality, a member of the family circle who Kennedy trusted "as I would my own Cabinet."²⁹⁶

On the night of 19 November 1963, after Kennedy had been assassinated, Jacqueline Kennedy sat with Theodore H. White at Hyannis Port and gave her

²⁸⁹ LIFE Magazine, *The President's Voracious Reading Habits*, 17 March 1961.

²⁹⁰ Matthews, *Jack Kennedy: Elusive Hero*, 161.

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, 34.

²⁹² Meagher and Gragg, *John F. Kennedy*, 14-15.

²⁹³ Christopher Sandford, *Harold and Jack: The Remarkable Friendship of Prime Minister Macmillan and President Kennedy* (2014), 14.

²⁹⁴ Lynne McTaggart, *Kathleen Kennedy, Her Life and Times*, (Garden City, N.Y. : Dial Press, 1983), 160.

²⁹⁵ Alistair Horne, *Harold Macmillan Vol. II*, (New York, N.Y., U.S.A. : Viking, 1989), 307-8.

²⁹⁶ Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, (1865), 559.

husband's Anglophilia its definitive mythological form. There she insisted that her husband's presidency be remembered through the Lerner-Loewe musical that had opened on Broadway in December 1960, the year of his election, based on T.H. White's 'The Once and Future King'. "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot."²⁹⁷ The interview thus encoded the Kennedy administration in the picture of an Arthurian romance, a chivalric, idealised, English past. Jacqueline stated that "there'll never be another Camelot again."²⁹⁸ That the widow of the American president reached for an English legend to memorialise him says something about the imaginative hold Britain still exercised over the Kennedy circle, and over the idea of what greatness in power could look like. The Camelot framing is a Barthesian operation itself, in which the historical moments of Kennedy's presidency were elevated into the second-order signifier of a chivalric brotherhood in which Macmillan, Ormsby-Gore, and the Anglo-American intelligentsia took their places as Knights of a transatlantic round table.

ii. *Macmillan's Mission*

The British side of the "Special Relationship" renewal was down to a Prime Minister who both understood the stakes and was a man whose Edwardian formation, literary sensibility, and carefully cultivated persona of patrician detachment spoke directly to Kennedy's own Anglophilia. Maurice Harold Macmillan, born in Belgrave on 10 February 1894, was the son of a publisher, and half-American Helen Artie Tarleton ('Nellie') Belles of Spencer, Indiana.²⁹⁹ He attended Eton and Balliol college, and served in the Grenadier Guards on the Western Front, where he was wounded on three counts.³⁰⁰ His subsequent decades as a publisher and Tory backbencher had produced a politician of layered cultural inheritance. What distinguished Macmillan from his Conservative contemporaries was his specific wartime posting from December 1942 to May 1945 as British Minister Resident at

²⁹⁷ "For President Kennedy: An Epilogue," by Theodore H. White, *Life*, 6 December 1963. JFK Library.

²⁹⁸ 'For President Kennedy'.

²⁹⁹ D. R. Thorpe, *Supermac: The Life of Harold Macmillan*, (London: Pimlico, 2011), 15.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 'Distant Prospects' and 'To Arms', 17-31, 46-60.

Allied Force Headquarters in the Mediterranean, where he served as the political adviser to General Dwight D. Eisenhower.³⁰¹

This relationship, initially cool, was thawed by Macmillan disclosing the fact that his “mother was born in Indiana [...] So I am a Hoosier.”³⁰² Macmillan observed that Eisenhower received this with “obvious pleasure, and after that we got on better.”³⁰³ This relationship forged in Algiers and Caserta, a relationship in which the British representative tutored the supreme Allied commander in the politics of coalition warfare, was the prototype for Macmillan’s famous Greek-Roman idiom.³⁰⁴ Eisenhower wrote to the Combined Chiefs of Staff that “he is obviously concerned only with assisting me to the utmost,” while Churchill wrote of them to Roosevelt, that “we are trying to make a solid contribution to your enterprise.”³⁰⁵ This mythological operation invokes the imperial-historical narrative, that the visible asymmetry of the alliance could be naturalised as an inheritance: Britain as the Greece to America’s Rome, lending wisdom to power.

By the time Macmillan succeeded Eden as Prime Minister on 10 January 1957, the Greek-Roman idiom had become his governing metaphor for British survival inside the post-Suez settlement. The three volumes of his memoirs, ‘Riding the Storm, 1956-1959’, ‘Pointing the Way, 1959-1961’, and ‘At the End of the Day, 1961-1963’ constitute a “candid contribution to an understanding of Britain’s place in the world in the twentieth century.”³⁰⁶ In them, the “Special Relationship” is described but also performed. Each volume narrates a sequence of diplomatic episodes (starting with Macmillan’s takeover from Eden) in which the elder, more experienced British leader manages, through a combination of personal warmth and historical literacy, to recall his American counterparts to the deeper purposes of the alliance.³⁰⁷ Just as Churchill’s memoirs were crucial in the discursive creation of the

³⁰¹ Anthony Sampson, *Macmillan: A Study in Ambiguity* (A&C Black, 2012) 59. See Appendix F, Figure 14 for a visual of Macmillan and Eisenhower together in the Mediterranean campaign.

³⁰² Horne, *Macmillan Vol I*, 158.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ Anthony Sampson, *Macmillan: A Study in Ambiguity* (A&C Black, 2012), 61.

³⁰⁵ Horne, *Macmillan Vol I*, 158.

³⁰⁶ Thorpe, *Supermac*, 590.

³⁰⁷ The three volumes trace an arc from reconstruction to intimacy. In ‘Riding the Storm’, Macmillan is explicit that restoring Anglo-American relations is his paramount objective, presenting the Bermuda conference as the first step in that project. The later volumes follow the deepening of his personal friendship with Kennedy.

original myth of the “Special Relationship”, Macmillan’s perform the same for the post-Suez reconstruction.

With Kennedy specifically, he truly assumed the “elder” statesman role. This became one of Macmillan’s principal instruments of the relationship.³⁰⁸ He addressed Kennedy in a series of long, discursive letters opening “Dear Friend,”³⁰⁹ a salutation first used with Eisenhower. Kennedy reciprocated by referring to him, in private, as “Uncle Harold”.³¹⁰ Schlesinger, Kennedy’s court historian, recorded that the President came to view Macmillan as one of the very few foreign leaders with whom he felt a genuine affinity.³¹¹ “I felt at home with him,” Kennedy told journalist Henry Brandon, “because I can share my loneliness with him. The others are all foreigners to me.”³¹² The remark, which was striking on its own terms, captures the mythological function Macmillan had assumed. He was not a foreign principal but a kinsman; the “Special Relationship” was not an alliance but familial. The strongest and key dimension to this chapter of the relationship is civilisational.

iii. Bermuda 1957 to Key West 1961: Personal Diplomacy in Summits

The interpersonal nature of the Macmillan-Kennedy years was built on foundation laid in the immediate aftermath of Suez. Eden had resigned on 9 January 1957. Within weeks, Macmillan and Eisenhower were corresponding privately about a meeting, with Eisenhower writing to Macmillan that he had “long been an earnest advocate of closer ties between our two countries.”³¹³ He then invokes the moral narrative of the Special Relationship, stating that “the nations of the free world cannot possibly carry the burdens and sacrifices necessary in the preservation of free systems of government unless they have the confidence that those to whom they look for world leadership are bound together by common convictions, purposes and

³⁰⁸ Sandford, *Harold and Jack: The Remarkable Friendship of Prime Minister Macmillan and President Kennedy*, 52.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

³¹¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days : John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 376.

³¹² Henry Brandon, *Special Relationships: A Foreign Correspondent’s Memoirs from Roosevelt to Reagan* (Atheneum, 1989), 160.

³¹³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, ‘Letter From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Macmillan’, Office of the Historian, 11 October 1957.

principles.”³¹⁴ The mythology, thus, had evidently been repaired. By mid-March they were in conclave at Mid-Ocean Club in Tucker’s Town, Bermuda.³¹⁵ The Bermuda Conference of 21-24 March is by Michael Dockrill as having “completely re-established” the “greatly mythologised [...] wartime relationship,” the UK still a “natural ally”.³¹⁶ Substantively, Bermuda was the first step in restoring intelligence sharing, normalising diplomatic communication, and opening the channel that would lead, fifteen months, to the 1958 US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement: the bilateral nuclear cooperation treaty of 3 July 1958 that effectively repealed the most restricted provisions of the 1946 McMahon Act, and would give Britain access to American warhead designs, fissile material exchanges, and submarine propulsion technology.³¹⁷ Mythologically, what mattered was the photographic and rhetorical performance of restored intimacy. Eisenhower and Macmillan in camaraderie, their staffs in apparent harmony, a joint communiqué that proclaimed they “conducted their discussions with the freedom and frankness permitted to old friends.”³¹⁸ Bermuda inaugurated a new mode of restoration that would be repeated at subsequent prime ministerial summits. A ‘Declaration of Common Purpose’ later followed, citing that their task had been to determine “how best to utilise the moral, intellectual and material strength of our two nations in the performance of our full share of those tasks that will more surely and promptly bring about conditions in which peace can prosper.”³¹⁹

The Camp David meeting of 28-30 March 1960, at which Macmillan and Eisenhower returned to nuclear questions in conditions of unusual privacy (at one point the two men met alone, without security or staff, at Eisenhower’s farm at Gettysburg)³²⁰ produced the agreement that would set the stage for the 1962 crisis.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Macmillan, *Riding the Storm, 1956-1959*, 250. See Appendix F, Figure 15 for a visual of the summit.

³¹⁶ Michael Dockrill “Restoring the ‘special relationship’ The Bermuda and Washington conferences, 1957” in Dick Richardson et al., *Decisions and Diplomacy: Studies in Twentieth Century International History* (Routledge, 2005), 221.

³¹⁷ John Baylis, ‘Independence and Interdependence 1957–1958’, in *Ambiguity and Deterrence: British Nuclear Strategy 1945-1964*, ed. John Baylis (Oxford University Press, 1995).

³¹⁸ ‘Joint Statement With Prime Minister Macmillan Following the Bermuda Conference, March 24, 1957.

³¹⁹ ‘Declaration of Common Purpose by the President and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom’, October 25, 1957.

³²⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Macmillan-Eisenhower Correspondence, 1957-1969* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 332.

The United States agreed to make Skybolt missiles available to the United Kingdom “subject only to United States priorities”, and Britain agreed to provide the facilities at Holy Loch on the Clyde for the basing of American Polaris-armed ballistic missile submarines.³²¹ The two halves of the deal were technically formally separate. Eisenhower’s memorandum to Macmillan of 29 March 1960 prepared to offer Skybolt, while the Holy Loch arrangement was mentioned in the memorandum, but negotiated as a parallel undertaking.³²² The Americans were at pains to insist on this separation in the disputes that would follow. But the British understanding, communicated in subsequent correspondence and never formally contradicted, that the two were politically linked.³²³ Skybolt for Holy Loch. As we will see, the asymmetry of that linkage would become the central dispute of the Skybolt Crisis.³²⁴

When Kennedy succeeded Eisenhower in January 1961, Macmillan moved to continue the streak of summits. The Kennedy-Macmillan meeting took place at the United States Naval Base at Key West Florida on 26 March 1961, in conditions of acute crisis over the situation in Laos.³²⁵ Kennedy had effectively summoned Macmillan to Key West in the middle of the latter’s planned Caribbean tour, an arrangement that Macmillan’s press secretary Harold Evans recorded in his diary as akin to “flying to [Moscow] for lunch”.³²⁶ Macmillan did so without complaint though, and used the seven-and-a-half hour meeting to deflect Kennedy’s pressure for a joint Anglo-American military intervention in Laos, securing instead a commitment to the diplomatic track that would lead to the Geneva agreements of 1962.³²⁷ Macmillan’s restraint averted what could have become a British entanglement in Southeast Asia.³²⁸ It allowed him to demonstrate to Kennedy, as he had to Eisenhower two decades earlier, that the British were a partner who could be relied upon to recall the American to a sense of historical proportion.

³²¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, ‘Memorandum From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Macmillan’, Office of the Historian, 29 March 1960.

³²² Eisenhower, ‘Memorandum From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Macmillan’.

³²³ Donette Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons* (Springer, 1999), 78.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³²⁵ Harold Evans, *Downing Street Diary: The Macmillan Years, 1957-1963*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 144-5.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

³²⁷ Harold Macmillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959-1961*, (New York, Harper, 1972), 336-338.

³²⁸ Sanford, *Harold and Jack: The Remarkable Friendship of Prime Minister Macmillan and President Kennedy*, 62.

The Washington meeting of 4-9 April 1961 deepened their engagement. Kennedy was surprised by the warmth and intellectual quality of his exchanges with the elderly Prime Minister. “Their talk [...] marked the real beginning of what became Kennedy’s closest personal relationship with a foreign leader.”³²⁹ What he had expected to be the dutiful courtesies of a man of the Eisenhower generation turned out to be among the most stimulating bilateral conversations of his early presidency. Schlesinger reports that “it was as if they had known each other all their lives.”³³⁰ By the time of the North American tour in April 1962, the personal relationship had become one of the principal assets of his foreign policy. Kennedy “went out of his way to do me honour,” Macmillan wrote, allowing him privileges on the tour which “are all really a breach of conduct for anyone not a head of state.”³³¹ Kennedy liked “these private and confidential talks” between the two leaders.³³² The pattern of cooperation that had emerged, which encompassed frequent cables during the Berlin Crisis of August 1961 (British engineers consequently fitting a “hotline” in Macmillan’s study to the Oval Office for direct communication),³³³ daily contact during the thirteen days of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 with Macmillan the first notified of the crisis out of all NATO leaders,³³⁴ with unusually frank correspondence on the prospect of a nuclear test ban treaty with the Soviet Union,³³⁵ supplied the personal capital that would prove indispensable when the structural fault line of the relationship opened beneath them at the end of 1962.

B. The Skybolt Crisis

i. *The Origins of British Nuclear Dependency*

To understand the magnitude of what was at stake at Nassau, we must understand the full structural dependence of the British deterrent in 1962. This is a dependence that was consistently described both in British public discourse and parliamentary debate in a language designed to obscure. The 1957 Defence White

³²⁹ Arthur M. (Arthur Meier) Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days : John F. Kennedy in the White House*, (Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 376

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Macmillan, *The Macmillan Diaries*, 467.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Sanford, *Harold and Jack: The Remarkable Friendship of Prime Minister Macmillan and President Kennedy*, 95.

³³⁴ Ibid, 184-6.

³³⁵ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days : John F. Kennedy in the White House*, 376.

Paper, presented to parliament in April 1957 by Macmillan's first Defence Secretary Duncan Sandys,³³⁶ had committed Britain to a strategy in which thermonuclear deterrence was the principal instrument of national defence, with conventional forces sharply reduced and National Service abolished by 1960.³³⁷ The basis of that deterrent was the V-bomber force: the Vickers Valiant, which entered service in 1955; the Avro Vulcan, which followed in 1956; and the Handley Page Victor, operational in 1957 and armed with British developed Blue Steel air-launched stand-off missiles in 1962.³³⁸ By 1960, however, it was clear that V-bombers' ability to penetrate Soviet air defences would not survive much beyond the mid-1960s. The question was what would replace them.

Three options were explored. The first was Blue Streak, a British medium-range ballistic missile programme that had begun in 1955; this was cancelled by Macmillan's government on 13 April 1960 on the ground that a fixed, liquid-fuelled missile launched from underground silos in the British Isles, was, given the small size of the country and the shortness of warning time from Soviet launch, almost certainly too vulnerable to a pre-emptive strike to constitute a credible deterrent.³³⁹ The second, Super Blue Steel, was a successor to another missile Blue Steel, an air-launched stand-off missile of greater range, which the British aircraft industry was technically capable of producing but which was cancelled to minimise delays.³⁴⁰ The third, Skybolt, was a procurement from the United States, and it was this option that Sandy's successor Harold Watkinson and Macmillan himself pursued at Camp David.³⁴¹ The British acceptance of Skybolt was thus already, in 1960, an admission that the United Kingdom could no longer sustain the technological basis of an independent strategic nuclear force on its own resources. The acceptance of Holy Loch was an admission that the price of American assistance would be the integration of British territory into the American deterrent posture.

³³⁶ Duncan Sandys, 'Defence: Outline of Future Policy (1957 White Paper)', White Paper, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, April 1957.

³³⁷ Martins S. Navias, 'The Sandys White Paper of 1957', in *Nuclear Weapons and British Strategic Planning, 1955–1958*, ed. Martin S. Navias (Oxford University Press, 1991).

³³⁸ Ian Proctor, *The Royal Air Force in the Cold War, 1950–1970*, Images of War (Pen & Sword Military, 2014).

³³⁹ Macmillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959–1961*, 251–253.

³⁴⁰ Richard Moore, 'Bad Strategy and Bomber Dreams: A New View of the Blue Streak Cancellation', *Contemporary British History* 27, no. 2 (2013): 149.

³⁴¹ Nigel J. Ashton, 'Harold Macmillan and the "Golden Days" of Anglo-American Relations Revisited, 1957–63', *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 4 (2005): 714.

Two arrangements illustrate the dependence on American deterrent before Skybolt. The first was the Thor agreement of February 1958. The United States had proposed deploying Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles on British soil as part of a broader NATO posture.³⁴² Despite sharp opposition from the Chief of Air Staff, Sir Dermot Boyle, who warned that the four Thor bases would constitute “four nuclear bullseyes”³⁴³ for Soviet missiles and serve American strategic interests more than British ones, Macmillan overrode the military chiefs on political grounds. The resulting agreement provided for sixty American Thor missiles deployed in Britain under a “dual key” arrangement, with warheads remaining under full American custody throughout.³⁴⁴ Britain could not fire the warheads without American concurrence. In the classified correspondence, the Duncan Sandys formally acknowledged that “these American missiles cannot, of course, be regarded as an element of independent British nuclear power”.³⁴⁵ The admission was made in secret so as to maintain the public language of independence.

Project E, agreed at the Bermuda conference in March 1957, had made the same admission at the level of the V-bomber force. The arrangement, which had been under negotiation between the RAF and USAF since 1954, provided for American atomic weapons to be stockpiled at RAF airfields under US custody, available for release to British aircraft subject to a presidential decision in an emergency.³⁴⁶ The move was strategic, as Britain had more bombers than bombs, and the Americans had more bombs than bombers. But the consequences for the claim to independence was severe. The V-bombers that constituted the visible and politically legible basis of British deterrence were, in a significant proportion of their planned operational use, dependent on weapons that remained under American control and could not be released without American authorisation.

³⁴² Baylis, ‘Independence and Interdependence 1957–1958’ 252–3.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Matthew Jones, “‘A Matter of Joint Decision’: The Origins of British Nuclear Retaliation Procedures and the Murphy–Dean Agreement of 1958*”, *The English Historical Review* 139, no. 601 (2024) 1527.

³⁴⁵ Ian Clark, ‘Bermuda and the Negotiation of the Thor Agreement’, in *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship: Britain’s Deterrent and America, 1957–1962*, ed. Ian Clark (Oxford University Press, 1994).

³⁴⁶ Len Scott et al., *Planning Armageddon: Britain, the United States and the Command of Western Nuclear Forces, 1945–1964* (Routledge, 2000).

What concealed this dependence, in British public discourse, was the persistence of the phrase the British “independent deterrent”.³⁴⁷ John Baylis observes that British nuclear strategy was at best confused during this period, oscillating between the goal of interdependence with the US and independence, still burnt from Suez.³⁴⁸ The claim of “independent deterrent” rested on a technical distinction. Britain retained independence at the level of warhead manufacturing, targeting, and command authority, but became structurally dependent on the United States for every successive delivery system from 1958 onwards. In every other material respect, as Baylis and Kristan Stoddart argue, the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement and the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement had replaced true independence with what Macmillan himself called ‘interdependency’: a cooperative nuclear alliance in which Britain depended entirely on American delivery systems while maintaining the political language of authority. As Lawrence Freedman analyses, the “‘independent’ nuclear deterrent [was] only in the sense of national control over its use.”³⁴⁹ The gap between the structural reality of dependence and the discursive insistence on independence was the central ambiguity of British nuclear policy from 1958 onwards, and it was an ambiguity actively cultivated by successive British governments.³⁵⁰ Therefore, the ambiguity of independence/dependence worked because it answered to two different audiences: to the Americans, dependence was what accompanied British cooperation, and to the British public and the Conservative parliamentary party, the language of independence obscured the growing dependency. The tenuous setup rested, in 1962, on the unspoken assumption that the missile around which it had been built would in fact be delivered.

ii. *Skybolt and The Camp David Agreement (1960)*

The Douglas GAM-87/Skybolt AGM-87 was an American air-launched ballistic missile under development by the United States Air Force from 1959.³⁵¹ Designed to be carried by strategic bombers, the missile offered a range of over one

³⁴⁷ Baylis, ‘Independence and Interdependence 1957–1958’ 242.

³⁴⁸ Ibid, 269.

³⁴⁹ John Baylis and Kristan Stoddart, *The British Nuclear Experience: The Roles of Beliefs, Culture and Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 342.

³⁵⁰ Baylis, "Introduction" in *Ambiguity and Deterrence: British Nuclear Strategy, 1945-1964*. (Clarendon Press, 2006) 72-4.

³⁵¹ Appendix F, Figure 19 for a visual of Skybolt.

thousand miles, allowing the launch aircraft to strike its target without entering Soviet airspace.³⁵² For Britain, Skybolt was the ideal solution to the crisis of delivery that had followed the cancellation of the Blue Streak and the abandonment of the Blue Steel Mark 2. Unlike Blue Streak, Skybolt was mobile and invulnerable to a pre-emptive strike. Carried on the RAF's Vulcan bombers,³⁵³ it would extend the operational life of the V-bomber force and preserve the RAF's role as the primary instrument of the British nuclear deterrent into the late 1960s and beyond.

The meeting between Macmillan and Eisenhower at Camp David on 28-30 March 1960 produced an agreement, the terms of which were extremely favourable to Britain, as was announced in the Commons debate on the 22 June 1960: "The cost of the main development of Skybolt is being borne by the United States Government."³⁵⁴ Britain was initially to order one hundred missiles³⁵⁵ permitted to fit their own warheads, preserving at least the formal appearance of an independent deterrent.³⁵⁶ In exchange, Macmillan had offered Eisenhower the use of Holy Loch on the Firth of Clyde as a forward operating based for United States Navy Polaris submarines.³⁵⁷ The arrangement would place American nuclear weapons on British soil on permanent station, and that was agreed with minimal parliamentary scrutiny and no public announcement of the linkage.³⁵⁸ Nothing in the Camp David communiqué formally connected Holy Loch to Skybolt, which would prove catastrophic. When the Kennedy administration inherited the arrangement, the officials who understood its terms had departed with Eisenhower; the documents, originating in the White House, had left with him to Gettysburg.³⁵⁹

From the late autumn of 1960, Skybolt's developmental difficulties were a matter of intermittent Pentagon record. The first five flight tests of the Skybolt AGM-87 missile, all conducted from B-52 carriers, were failures;³⁶⁰ the development

³⁵² Matthew Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent. Volume I: From the V-Bomber Era to the Arrival of Polaris, 1945-1964* (Routledge, 2017), 237.

³⁵³ Eisenhower, 'Memorandum From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Macmillan'.

³⁵⁴ 'Skybolt Missile (Hansard, 22 June 1960)'.

³⁵⁵ Eisenhower, 'Memorandum From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Macmillan'.

³⁵⁶ Richard Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 120-1.

³⁵⁷ Eisenhower, 'Memorandum From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Macmillan'.

³⁵⁸ Scott et al., *Planning Armageddon*, 70.

³⁵⁹ Richard E. Neustadt, *Report to JFK: The Skybolt Crisis in Perspective* (Cornell University Press, 1999).

³⁶⁰ Ibid, *Report to JFK*, 67.

costs were rising;³⁶¹ and the United States Air Force itself, the original sponsor of the programme, was beginning to lose interest as it became clear that the Minuteman I intercontinental ballistic missile and the Polaris submarine launched ballistic missile would together constitute a more credible counterforce capability than Skybolt could provide.³⁶² These difficulties were known to British officials, and were the subject of communications between the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Aviation.³⁶³ What did not happen, however, was any sustained British contingency planning for the eventuality of Skybolt's cancellation. As UK officials would later put it, the British position was that there was "no egg, and no other basket."³⁶⁴ Blue Streak had been cancelled; Blue Steel Mark 2 has been ruled out; the V-bomber force without a credible new weapon would lapse, by the late 1960s, into strategic obsolescence. Skybolt was the British deterrent.

The created what Richard E. Neustadt would describe as "unperceived shades of institutional difference" in the report he prepared for President Kennedy.³⁶⁵ The Americans assumed that the British, fully informed of Skybolt's troubles, were exercising strategic flexibility of an ally; the British assumed that the Americans, fully aware of British dependence on Skybolt, would not cancel it without prior consultation and assured replacement. Both assumptions were, in their way, mythological. They read into the alliance an automatic mutual consideration that the alliance did not in fact possess at this point. The transaction of the Camp David agreement had indeed occurred, but as the political assembly in Washington changed, the fragility of the British position became material.

That administrative position shifted with the arrival of Robert McNamara at the Pentagon in January 1961. McNamara, the former Ford Motor Company executive whom Kennedy had appointed as Secretary of Defence, brought to the department a programme of doctrinal and managerial reform.³⁶⁶ He implemented cost-effectiveness analysis, programme budgeting, the systemic interrogation of strategic rationale, all of which was incompatible with continued investment in a

³⁶¹ Ibid, 32.

³⁶² Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 50.

³⁶³ Ibid, 47.

³⁶⁴ Ken Young, 'The Skybolt Crisis of 1962: Muddle or Mischief?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 27, no. 4 (2004): 614–35 630.

³⁶⁵ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 128.

³⁶⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 66.

weapon system whose marginal contribution to American deterrence was now negligible.³⁶⁷ More to the point, McNamara was an outspoken sceptic of the doctrine of independent national nuclear force among American allies. In a speech at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor on 16 June 1962, McNamara declared that “limited nuclear capabilities, operating independently, are dangerous, expensive, prone to obsolescence, and lacking in credibility as a deterrent.”³⁶⁸ This was a formulation widely understood, in London and Paris, to refer principally to the British and French deterrents.³⁶⁹ The Ann Arbor speech foreshadowed what would follow. By the autumn of 1962, with five Skybolt test failures on the books and the alternative weapons systems Hound Dog, Minuteman, and Polaris already in service or imminent, the cancellation of Skybolt was an obvious decision to McNamara’s strictly logical Pentagon.³⁷⁰

iii. Macnamara’s Cancellation (Nov-Dec 1962)

On 7 November 1962, McNamara met with Kennedy and Secretary of State David Dean Rusk, with McGeorge Bundy and Paul Nitze also present, to plan the cancellation of Skybolt.³⁷¹ The Secretary’s budgetary logic was that the termination would save 2.5 billion across several fiscal years.³⁷² Both men agreed with his reasoning and stressed the importance of letting the British down gently, ensuring consultation at the earliest opportunity. McNamara volunteered to handle the matter personally, Kennedy agreeing that he should brief both Ormsby-Gore and Peter Thorneycraft, Minister of Defence.³⁷³ “I’ll take care of it,” he offered.³⁷⁴

The following day, McNamara briefed British Ambassador Ormsby-Gore. The Secretary could not tell him that Skybolt was definitively cancelled, as the President had yet to give his formal approval. Instead, he reported that the increases in cost were causing reconsideration of the programme, and alluded to the fact that cancellation was likely.³⁷⁵ Ormsby-Gore responded strongly, emphasising that it

³⁶⁷ Alain C. Enthoven, “Three Controversial Program Decisions” in *How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961-1969*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1972), 243-267.

³⁶⁸ ‘McNamara’s No-Cities Speech’, June 1962.

³⁶⁹ Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship*, 288.

³⁷⁰ Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 48.

³⁷¹ *Ibid*, 53.

³⁷² Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 36.

³⁷³ Robert S. McNamara, ‘Notes of Conversations Relating To Skybolt’, Office of the Historian.

³⁷⁴ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 37.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 37-8.

would be “political dynamite” in London if the programme were to be cancelled.³⁷⁶ He sent a dispatch to London describing Skybolt under threat. On 9 November, McNamara called Thorneycroft. He relayed what he had told Gore. Thorneycroft had suspected the cancellation from his meeting with McNamara in September, and used the phone call to stress the need for a successor weapon—if Skybolt was indeed cancelled.³⁷⁷ Within the State Department, the impending cancellation was the cause of internal fragmentation over what alternatives, if any, should be offered. Offering Polaris was wildly unpopular.³⁷⁸ As a consequence, the document that McNamara brought to London contained no Polaris offer.

In London, the weeks between McNamara’s November warnings and his December arrival were characterised by a mutual “immobilisation” that Neustadt would later identify as one of the episode’s most consequential failures.³⁷⁹ The common conception is that Thorneycroft “did nothing” between being hinted to about the cancellation and the 11 December meeting.³⁸⁰ However, Ian Clark’s reading of the British archives complicates this verdict. Thorneycroft, aware that Skybolt was finished, moved quickly. Within days of McNamara’s telephone call, he had informed Sir Philip de Zulueta that his thinking was already moving towards Polaris, and by 7 December he had produced a detailed paper for Macmillan setting out precisely what he intended to seek from McNamara.³⁸¹ The constraint on Thorneycroft was the absence of a prior American commitment. He could not bid for Polaris, as he later explained to Neustadt, “until I was sure I could get it.”³⁸² The real immobility lay with Macmillan. Afraid of upsetting the “status quo” and muddying the waters for Britain’s entry to the EEC, he preferred to keep Skybolt nominally in play rather than force a decision.³⁸³ Macmillan held back from using the private telephone line to Kennedy, on Ormsby-Gore’s advice that the President was not yet fully briefed and the approach might be premature.³⁸⁴ In a meeting with

³⁷⁶ Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship*, 352.

³⁷⁷ Matthew Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent. Volume I: From the V-Bomber Era to the Arrival of Polaris, 1945-1964* (Routledge, 2017), 439.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 442.

³⁷⁹ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 55.

³⁸⁰ Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship*, 357.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 355.

³⁸² Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 49.

³⁸³ Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship*, 357.

³⁸⁴ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 60.

Thorneycroft, he recommended taking a “cagey line”.³⁸⁵ On the American side, McNamara notes the absence of any distressed response from London and interpreted it as calm.³⁸⁶ Between 9 November and 3 December, London and Washington exchanged regular messages, excepting the subject of Skybolt.³⁸⁷

The formal American decision hardened over this period.³⁸⁸ On 20 November the Joint Chiefs filed their recommendations.³⁸⁹ McNamara travelled to Hyannis Port on 23 November for a meeting with the President at which presidential action on the issue was formally recorded as approving cancellation, “subject to consultation with the British on alternatives.”³⁹⁰ Assistant Secretary of Defence Charles Hitch eliminated Skybolt from the budget on December 4, and notified the Services that programmes would be cancelled at the end of the month.³⁹¹ McNamara estimated that the story would leak around 10 December, with authoritative news stories implying cancellation.³⁹²

The meeting of 11 December in London was tense and inconclusive. McNamara arrived to find the British press already agitated, and compounded the political damage by issuing a statement on arrival that alluded to the Skybolt cancellation.³⁹³ Inside the meeting, he presented a document outlining the American approach: the options on offer were Hound Dog (a nuclear-armed cruise missile) or the option of Britain continuing Skybolt development independently.³⁹⁴ Thorneycroft, who had expected an offer of Polaris, was dismayed. The Minister pressed McNamara directly. “I notice you’ve dropped Polaris from your paper. We talked about Polaris on the telephone, why have you dropped it?”³⁹⁵ McNamara eventually implied that Polaris might be considered if Britain agreed to pledge the force to NATO, which only deepened the confusion.³⁹⁶ The meeting ended without resolution.

³⁸⁵ Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship*, 356.

³⁸⁶ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 63.

³⁸⁷ Ibid, 61.

³⁸⁸ Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent. Volume I*, 446.

³⁸⁹ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 40.

³⁹⁰ Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 54.

³⁹¹ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 62.

³⁹² Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 66.

³⁹³ Ibid, 55.

³⁹⁴ Richard E. Neustadt, *Alliance Politics* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1970), 46.

³⁹⁵ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 73.

³⁹⁶ Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 55

With the London meeting inconclusive and the scheduled summit of Nassau approaching, the meeting between Kennedy and Macmillan had become the only plausible venue for settlement.

iv. *The Communication Failure and Mythological Misreading*

Richard E. Neustadt's posthumous account, prepared for Kennedy in November 1963 and only published in declassified form as 'Report to JFK: The Skybolt Crisis in Perspective' in 1999, identifies the central pathology of the episode as a failure of paired imagination, that the US and the UK "heard [from each other] mostly what their minds were set to hear."³⁹⁷ In his later work 'Alliance Politics' that discusses both Suez and Skybolt, he argues that either side was operating with a mental model of the other that was so deeply embedded in the routinised practices of the alliance that neither could quite see its own assumptions.³⁹⁸ The Americans assumed that the British knew Skybolt was probably going to be cancelled, (after all, they had been told repeatedly of the programme's troubles) and were preparing for that outcome. The British assumed that the Americans, knowing the political and strategic weight that Skybolt carried for British defence, would not cancel it without first planning a replacement. Each side was right about what it communicated and wrong about what had been received. When Kennedy later read the draft of Neustadt's report on Skybolt, he turned to his wife and said, "If you want to know what my life is like, read this."³⁹⁹

In a Barthesian reading, The Camp David Agreement was a first-order level instrument of exchange. Missiles for a submarine base, with explicit terms and no formal linkage between the two halves of the transaction. At the second-order level, it had become something else entirely: the naturalised expression of interdependence, moral obligation, and the Special Relationship. The British continued to read Skybolt as a token of the relationship up until the very last minute. However, McNamara's logical approach exposed the myth. That this exposure produced a recomposition of the myth rather than its destruction is the result of the Nassau Summit.

³⁹⁷ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 27.

³⁹⁸ Neustadt, *Alliance Politics*, 67-69.

³⁹⁹ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 5.

C. Nassau, December 1962: Repair

i. The Negotiation: Macmillan's Performance and Kennedy's Concession

The Nassau Conference convened at Government House in Nassau, the British colony of the Bahamas, on the morning of the 18th of December 1962. It ran until the issuance of the joint communiqué on 21 December. The British Delegation comprised Macmillan, Foreign Secretary Lord Home, Ambassador David Ormsby-Gore, Defence Minister Peter Thorneycroft, the former Defence Secretary and now Commonwealth Secretary Duncan Sandys, the Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Solly Zuckerman, and Vice-Admiral Sir Michael Le Fanu. The American delegation was led by Kennedy, with McNamara, the State Department Counsellor George Ball, the National Security Advisor George Bundy, and the Ambassador to the United Kingdom David Bruce.⁴⁰⁰ Ormsby-Gore, who had flown to Nassau in Air Force One with Kennedy from Washington, brokered a preliminary compromise en route: that that United States would propose to share the remaining Skybolt development costs with Britain on a fifty-fifty basis. Macmillan would, on arrival, decisively reject this.⁴⁰¹

The conditions were not fantastic. The British press was already in revolt, and on 17 December Kennedy had compounded the difficulty by giving a television interview in which he denounced the missile in blunt terms: “we don’t think that we are going to get \$2.5 billion worth of national security.”⁴⁰² This remark had reached the British delegation without prior notification. Macmillan arrived from a depressing meeting with de Gaulle at Rambouillet, where the French president had made it plain that he intended to keep Britain out of the European Economic Community.⁴⁰³ Macmillan had written in his diary that “we will have a difficult time with the Americans in Nassau”,⁴⁰⁴ and prepared accordingly.

⁴⁰⁰ Department of State, ‘Memorandum of Conversation, Nassau’, Office of the Historian, 20 November 1962.

⁴⁰¹ Horne, *Harold Macmillan*, 438.

⁴⁰² Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 81-82.

⁴⁰³ Macmillan, *The Macmillan Diaries*, 526.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

Macmillan's decision was to negotiate as a performance. His opening session set the tone. According to British record, he laid out, "in his familiar grand style, the history of Anglo-American nuclear relations since the war", covering the Manhattan Project, the McMahon Act and its amendment, the Camp David understandings of March 1960, the Holy Loch facility provided to the United States Navy. Henry Brandon, observing the conference for the Sunday Times, described Macmillan as opening "like Mark Anthony giving the funeral oration" before launching to what Brandon termed a "moving" recollection of Anglo-American partnership.⁴⁰⁵ Walt Rostow, attending for the American side, recorded a different image of the same performance. Macmillan, he later remarked, was "like an Edwardian Shakespearean actor overplaying the drama of poor old Harold at the end of the road."⁴⁰⁶ Roswell Gilpatric, the Deputy Secretary of Defence, recalled the American delegation as "spellbound", and that "Macmillan had such an extraordinary power of influencing an audience."⁴⁰⁷ The mode of the negotiation was thus established from the outset as an oratory performance of historical depth and personal sacrifice.

Though the main argument was civilisational, once more, the moral dimension of the myth was outwardly invoked. Macmillan returned repeatedly to the proposition that the Camp David Agreement, though formally separate from the Holy Loch deal, had been understood as *quid pro quo*, and that the cancellation of Skybolt accordingly left Kennedy with an inherited moral obligation to compensate.⁴⁰⁸ He admitted that he "had been wrong" to opt for Skybolt rather than Polaris in 1960.⁴⁰⁹ This admission, however, served less as a concession than as a setting for his next move. Skybolt could not be revived because, as Macmillan eloquently put it, "The lady has been violated in public."⁴¹⁰ The Prime Minister's humour and explicit invocation of the Eisenhower precedent served to reconstitute the alliance as the relationship it had been, rather than treating the summit as merely the transaction for Polaris.

⁴⁰⁵ Brandon, *Special Relationships: A Foreign Correspondent's Memoirs from Roosevelt to Reagan*, 165.

⁴⁰⁶ Richard Neustadt, 'Rostow, Walt W.: Oral History Interview - JFK #1, 4/11/1964 | JFK Library', 11 April 1964.

⁴⁰⁷ Richard Neustadt, 'Roswell L. Gilpatric Oral History Interview JFK #3, 6/30/1970', JFK Library, 30 June 1970.

⁴⁰⁸ Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 77.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 87.

⁴¹⁰ David Nunnerly, *President Kennedy and Britain*, (Bodley Head, 1972), 155.

The most contested point of the negotiation, after Kennedy had relented and Polaris had been agreed upon, was the question of whether Britain's Polaris force could be described publicly as independent. The American draft proposed that any British withdrawal of the Polaris force from NATO assignment be permitted only in the case of a "dire national emergency".⁴¹¹ Macmillan rejected the formulation as a "fig leaf", in Kennedy's own phrase, that would expose his Government to ridicule at home.⁴¹² To convey what he required, he turned to a deliberately archaic image. The British Polaris force, he told Kennedy, must be "as much a part of Her Majesty's Government's forces as were the Brigade of Guards", adding that "if the Queen's Ministers gave orders Her troops would obey."⁴¹³ He then deepened the appeal by reference to his own military service: "When in the 1914 war [my] battalion had been nearly wiped out, the officers and men had fought not because of the 'entente cordiale' but because of their loyalty to their King and country."⁴¹⁴ This register mobilised personal biography, monarchical iconography, and the memory of the Battle of the Somme in defence of a clause about command authority over a nuclear submarine. He meant to perform the meaning of national sovereignty for an audience that included, crucially, a President of the United States who had himself served in combat.

The performance worked because Kennedy was its proper audience. Neustadt, summing up the negotiation, observed that where "McNamara and Thorneycroft had spoken different languages; these two spoke the same."⁴¹⁵ Brandon Murray describes a "burgeoning and blossoming of the two leaders' personal affection for each other" as the talks proceeded.⁴¹⁶ Macmillan himself, reporting to Butler in London at the close of the first difficult day, identified Kennedy's receptiveness in pointedly political terms. "Unlike his highbrow advisers, the President is a political animal and senses the dangers ahead."⁴¹⁷ Neustadt later put it more succinctly: "it was a case of 'king to king' and it frustrated the court."⁴¹⁸

⁴¹¹ Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent. Volume I*, 472.

⁴¹² Ibid, 476.

⁴¹³ Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 89.

⁴¹⁴ Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent. Volume I*, 478.

⁴¹⁵ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 92.

⁴¹⁶ Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 96.

⁴¹⁷ Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent. Volume I*, 474.

⁴¹⁸ Horne, *Harold Macmillan*, 439.

Kennedy's eventual concession, formalised in the Nassau Statement on Nuclear Defence Systems of 21 December, included the provision that the British Polaris force could be withdrawn from NATO assignment "when Her Majesty's Government may decide that supreme national interests are at stake."⁴¹⁹ The wording was a deliberate compromise between Macmillan's "Brigade of Guards" formulation and the American preference for tight definition. It satisfied the British requirement that independence would be readable in the text while leaving the Americans able to claim that the force was committed to the multilateral framework. As Murray notes, the agreement was "swaddled in masterly ambiguity."⁴²⁰ That ambiguity was a precise condition under which the myth of the alliance could be reconstituted: each side could read the document in the register it required, and the relationship could be presented to both publics as required.

ii. *The Choreography of Repair*

The negotiation at Nassau was conducted with an elaborate visual and ceremonial architecture, the elements of which deserve attention in their own right—none the least, because of how this played into the ceremonial performance of the "Special Relationship" that has continued until this day. The conference itself was the latest in what Matthew Jones identifies as a developing pattern of "regular six-monthly conclaves between the President and Prime Minister."⁴²¹ Bermuda 1957 had inaugurated the pattern; Camp David 1960 had extended it; Key West and Bermuda 1961⁴²² had consolidated it; Nassau December 1962 completed the set. The location itself was chosen for the same reasons that Camp David had been chosen, to permit the appearance of intimacy, of conversation, of two men working out a shared problem. The pictures from Nassau where Kennedy and Macmillan are sat together in the garden⁴²³ emulate the likes of the wartime conferences such as Casablanca, where Churchill and Roosevelt are seated on garden chairs, conferring with one another.⁴²⁴

⁴¹⁹ 'United States-United Kingdom Statement on Nuclear Defense Systems (Nassau Agreement) December 21, 1962', *International Legal Materials* 2, no. 2 (1963): 279–279.

⁴²⁰ Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 101.

⁴²¹ Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent. Volume I*, 449.

⁴²² See Appendix F, Figure 16 and 17.

⁴²³ See Appendix F, Figure 18.

⁴²⁴ See Appendix F, Figure 7.

The choreography of the conference's public moments reinforced this signification. Though the initial airport reception from the British delegation was frosty (the "angriest delegation"⁴²⁵ since Suez), the atmosphere was soon thawed by Kennedy and Macmillan's friendship. Macmillan's decision, on the evening of 18 December, to take Kennedy for a walk,⁴²⁶ reproduced the walks between Macmillan and Eisenhower at Camp David and Gettysburg.⁴²⁷ Significantly, this occurred the night before Macmillan's speech on the chronicle of Anglo-American relations. They spoke of "their shared interest in history and the things they found ridiculous or funny, or deadly serious, [and] the whole atmosphere began to change from above."⁴²⁸ Alistair Horne describes "mountains of bureaucracy" being swept away by the literal "magic of their friendship."⁴²⁹

Even the procedural moments of the conference were performed in this manner. When agreement on the Nassau communiqué was reached in principle on 20 December, Macmillan consulted the Cabinet in London before signing.⁴³⁰ Technically, no such consultation was required. Macmillan could have committed the Cabinet by his own authority, with his delegation present. The request was "insurance against any accusation of being arbitrary", a performance designed to ensure that the Cabinet would assume "collective responsibility for defending the agreement in Britain."⁴³¹ It presented to the British public as the more of a proper constitutional process as opposed to a deal struck. In other words, performance extended beyond the conference room.

The final element of the choreography was the press conference and joint communiqué of 21 December. The document itself, the "Statement on Nuclear Defence Systems", was, by general agreement among its drafters and subsequent commentators, deliberately vague. Theodore Sorensen described as full of "deliberate ambiguities", and "hasty improvisation".⁴³² Again, the ambiguity was productive. It allowed Kennedy to present Nassau as a step towards to the

⁴²⁵ Neustadt, *Report to JFK*, 89.

⁴²⁶ Horne, *Harold Macmillan*, 438.

⁴²⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Macmillan-Eisenhower Correspondence, 1957-1969* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 332.

⁴²⁸ Horne, *Harold Macmillan*, 439.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Harold Macmillan, *At the End of the Day, 1961-1963* (Harper & Row, 1973), 360.

⁴³¹ Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons*, 90.

⁴³² Theodore C. SORENSEN, *Kennedy*, 568.

multilateral force that his administrations European policy required, while permitting Macmillan to present it as the preservation of the independent British deterrent that his domestic political position required.

iii. The Nassau Communiqué

The text of the Nassau Communiqué comprises ten paragraphs, of which the most important are paragraphs five through eight, covering nuclear defence systems. Paragraph five frames the Polaris decision as part of “new and closer arrangements for the organisation and control of strategic Western defence”.⁴³³ Paragraph six proposes that, as an immediate measure, “some part of the forces already in existence”⁴³⁴ such as US Strategic Air Command, UK Bomber Command, and tactical nuclear forces in Europe, should be subscribed to NATO. Paragraph eight contains the operative clauses on Polaris itself. The eighth paragraph is worth quoting at length, since it is the textual substance of the entire mythological repair effected at Nassau.

Accordingly, the President and the Prime Minister agreed that the U.S. will make available on a continuing basis Polaris missiles (less warheads) for British submarines... The UK Government will construct the submarines in which these weapons will be placed and they will also provide the nuclear warheads for the Polaris missiles. British forces developed under this plan will be assigned and targeted in the same way as the forces described in paragraph 6. These forces, and at least equal U.S. Forces, would be made available for inclusion in a NATO multilateral nuclear force. The Prime Minister made it clear that except where H.M.G. may decide that supreme national interests are at stake, these British forces will be used for the purposes of international defence of the Western Alliance in all circumstances.⁴³⁵

The “supreme national interests” clause is, in the Barthesian sense, the linchpin of the entire mythological architecture at Nassau. Read literally, it commits the British Polaris force to NATO assignment in all circumstances except those in

⁴³³ ‘United States-United Kingdom Statement on Nuclear Defence Systems (Nassau Agreement) December 21, 1962’.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

which the British government unilateral decides to withdraw it. Since the criterion of “supreme national interest” is not subject to NATO concurrence, and is not defined in the agreement, the clause is operationally a British escape hatch. Read mythologically, it converts the technical fact of profound dependence into a signifier of independence: the right of the British sovereign to recall her forces from collective service. When making the case for exercising the right to “supreme national interest”, Macmillan cited cases in which British overseas commitments would need protection, such as Soviet pressure of the kind experienced during the Suez Crisis, hypothetical Iraqi aggression against Kuwait,⁴³⁶ or a threat to Singapore.⁴³⁷ None of these examples, of course, was likely to be a scenario in which the UK would actually use a strategic nuclear weapon, but the answer filled the slot that the clause required.

The first order historical sign at Nassau was thus a procurement contract: the United States agreed to sell Britain a particular missile system, on agreed financial terms, for use in submarines Britain itself would build. The second-order signifier was “the independent British nuclear deterrent”, a phrase preserved from the 1957 White Paper and the 1960 Camp David agreement and threaded, by means of the supreme national interests clause, through to the Nassau communiqué into the Polaris Sales Agreement of 1963, the Anglo-American Trident discussions of the 1980s⁴³⁸, and the operational agreements that govern the UK’s deterrent today.⁴³⁹ Polaris was a perfect myth. It transformed the contingent fact of an arms transfer into the natural fact of a national deterrent.

iv. The Multilateral Force (MLF) Question and the De Gaulle Veto

The Nassau Agreement did not come without a price; one which encapsulated the dilemma that Britain has faced for centuries: towards America, or towards Europe? The Nassau communiqué’s paragraphs six and seven committed both nations to work toward a multilateral nuclear force within NATO, and paragraph nine extended the

⁴³⁶ Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent. Volume I*, 475.

⁴³⁷ Ibid, 473.

⁴³⁸ See “supreme national interest” in ‘Letter to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom on the Sale of the Trident II Missile System’, March 11, 1982.

⁴³⁹ See “operationally independent” in ‘The UK’s Nuclear Deterrent: The National Endeavour Explained’, GOV.UK, accessed 3 June 2026.

Polaris offer to France on the same terms as Britain—excepting the escape hatch clause.⁴⁴⁰ The offer was genuine in intent, designed to forestall the charge that Nassau constituted an exclusive Anglo-Saxon nuclear club. Yet, this was an offer made publicly, without the ceremony that de Gaulle would have expected, and that Macmillan was extended. It was viewed as an empty, conciliatory offer. The French Minister of Information said as much, that France had “neither the submarines required for the Polaris missiles nor the warheads.”⁴⁴¹ De Gaulle, pursuing an independent nuclear deterrent and a vision of European autonomy under French leadership, would not have accepted a subordination of his nuclear forces to NATO.

On 14 January 1963, less than a month after Nassau, de Gaulle held his celebrated press conference at the Élysée Palace. In a single address, he rejected both the Polaris offer and Britain’s application to join the European Economic Community, declaring that Britain was too closely tied to the United States to participate in the construction of a genuinely European community.⁴⁴² Whether Nassau caused the veto is a question that divides historiography. Macmillan had understood that agriculture was the only issue for Britain’s accession, and Kennedy had also thought that the Polaris agreement was not the reason for de Gaulle’s actions.⁴⁴³ Schlesinger records Kennedy pushing the question further back: “could it have been the decision not to give France nuclear information in 1962? Or the refusal to establish de Gaulle’s tripartite NATO directorship in 1958? Or the treatment of de Gaulle by Roosevelt and Churchill during the Second World War?”⁴⁴⁴ Whatever the real cause, Nassau gave de Gaulle an excuse with a public occasion. The spectacle of an Anglo-American bilateral nuclear pact, struck in the Caribbean without French consultation, was the kind of evidence de Gaulle required to sustain his argument that Britain remained an Atlantic, not a European, power.

This was the cost to the myth. The restoration of it, through the civilisational frame, symbolism, personal diplomacy, and privileged nuclear access, was achieved

⁴⁴⁰ ‘United States-United Kingdom Statement on Nuclear Defense Systems (Nassau Agreement) December 21, 1962’ paragraph 9.

⁴⁴¹ Clarke, *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire : Churchill, Roosevelt, and the Birth of the Pax Americana*, 865.

⁴⁴² Charles de Gaulle, *Major Addresses, Statements, and Press Conferences of General Charles de Gaulle, March 17, 1964-May 16, 1967*, (French Embassy, Press and Information Division, 1967), 208-223.

⁴⁴³ Robin Renwick, *Fighting With Allies*, 187.

⁴⁴⁴ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 868.

at the expense of Britain's European ambitions. The Multilateral Force (MLF), preserved in the communiqué's text, was abandoned. The prospect of Britain as a European partner on equal terms with France had dissolved, for now. The bilateral Anglo-American nuclear relationship survived. This is a tension that still very much exists today, as Britain finds itself endlessly caught between the continent and the former colonies.

D. The Mythological Anatomy of Skybolt-Polaris: Modes of Repair

i. The Anglophilia Frame

What Nassau achieved, in the mythological sense, was the substitution of one frame for the others. The two frames of imperial-historical and moral had collapsed at Suez. Imperial-historical: Britain figured as a global imperial power whose military operations the United States would, given proper Atlanticist sensibilities, support out of recognition of shared responsibility. Moral: that Britain's exercise of force, conducted in the name of containment of totalitarian aggression, would be recognised by the United States as morally legitimate, and entitled, as in 1939, to eventual allied solidarity. The imperial-historical frame collapsed because Eden's intervention was the unilateral action of a declining power attempting to preserve the post-colonial settlement that the United States had co-authored. The moral frame collapsed primarily because of the collusion at Sèvres, not only embarrassing Britain but placing it on the wrong side of the moral vocabulary it had helped construct. The myth had been turned against its author. It was thus the untouched civilisational frame that was mobilised at Nassau.

The first basis for repair within the civilisational narrative was Anglophile cultural repertoire. Kennedy's identification with the British political class meant that the negotiation could be framed, on both sides, a transaction between brothers-in-arms. Macmillan understood this, and exploited it with corresponding skill. His opening exposition at Nassau, the lecture on the historical evolution of Anglo-American nuclear cooperation was a deliberate activation of the civilisational frame that Kennedy was disposed to receive. The Polaris missile became the material token of civilisational reaffirmation, a weapons system whose transfer from American to

British hands signified, in Macmillan's framing and the publicly received account of Nassau, the persistence of the wartime intimacy under conditions of the nuclear age.

ii. Two Men, One Myth (Once More)

The second mode of repair was the palpable warmth of personal diplomacy. Bermuda, Camp David, Key West, Bermuda again, and finally Nassau 1962: the visual and rhetorical iconography of Anglo-American summitry was steadily refined into a recognisable genre. Two leaders, photographed in informal but dignified settings, accompanied by carefully orchestrated communiqués that emphasised consultation and concord. It was the means by which substantive diplomacy was conducted, but also the mythological proof that the relationship existed in a register distinct from ordinary alliance politics.

This is the point at which the gap between alliance theory and mythological analysis becomes most visible. From the standpoint of Walt's balance-of-threat theory, the Macmillan-Kennedy relationship is determined. Two states facing the same Soviet threat, with broadly compatible strategic doctrines and complementary military capabilities, would be expected to align regardless of the personal qualities of their leaders.⁴⁴⁵ What Walt's framework cannot explain, that Nassau illustrates, is the symbolic work that the manner of the alignment performs. Two states facing the same threat could have aligned through a contract between defence ministries, they could have aligned through a series of bilateral arrangements that made no claim on civilisational continuity. They did not. They aligned through an intimate summit, framed by the rhetoric of ancestry and friendship, and codified in language deliberately calibrated to obscure the structure of dependence it created. The agreement and reconciliation between the two states required this ritual of performance, a performance that has continued at successive summits and state visits between the US and the UK today. What was at stake at Nassau was the future nuclear framework for both countries, but of equal importance was the future of the Special Relationship.

⁴⁴⁵ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell University Press, 2013).

iii. Dependence Reframed as Privilege

The third mode of repair was the reframing of structural dependence as privileged access within the Anglo-Saxon community. This is the most central operation that converts Nassau from a moment of British humiliation into a moment of British vindication. Read against the facts: Skybolt cancelled without consultation, and the British deterrent saved only by personal intervention, the price paid in MLF concessions and European exclusion—Nassau is a record of profound vulnerability. Through the mythological frame Macmillan constructed and the communiqué codified, it is a record of unique privilege. Britain was the only American ally to receive Polaris on bilateral terms, the only ally permitted to construct its own submarines and provide its own warheads, the only ally whose deterrent was assigned to NATO subject to a unilateral national escape clause.

What stabilised the privileged-access reading was the willingness of both sides to inhabit it in their public statements. The Nassau communiqué's careful diction, which described Polaris as the basis for "new and closer arrangements"⁴⁴⁶ rather than as a substitute for a cancelled programme, was the textual instrument of this stabilisation. The Greek-Roman trope, the wartime echoes, the affective register of "Uncle Harold" and "Dear Friend": all of these worked to convert what could have been read as a moment of catastrophic exposure into what was instead understood as a confirmation of intimacy.

iv. The Permanent Architecture: Communiqué to Treaty

The Nassau communiqué required formal implementation through a treaty. The Polaris Sales Agreement was negotiated in the first months of 1963. The process involved Solly Zuckerman's mission to Washington in January, the Nitze-Galantin mission to London later that spring,⁴⁴⁷ and protracted disputes over research-and-development cost-sharing⁴⁴⁸ in which Macmillan, conveying his position through Ormsby-Gore, insisted that "a domestic political crisis"⁴⁴⁹ would occur if the Nassau agreements broke down. He ended up securing a five percent surcharge formula that

⁴⁴⁶ 'United States-United Kingdom Statement on Nuclear Defence Systems (Nassau Agreement) December 21, 1962'.

⁴⁴⁷ 'The Resolution of Polaris', U.S. Naval Institute, 1 April 1985.

⁴⁴⁸ Andrew Priest, 'In American Hands: Britain, the United States and the Polaris Nuclear Project 1962–1968', *Contemporary British History* 19, no. 3 (2005): 353–76.

⁴⁴⁹ Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent. Volume I*, 520.

resolved the financial impasse.⁴⁵⁰ The treaty was signed in Washington on 6 April 1963 by US Secretary of State Dean Rusk and the British Ambassador David Ormsby-Gore.⁴⁵¹ Under its terms, the United States would supply the United Kingdom with the Polaris “missiles; missile launching and handling systems; missile fire control systems; ships navigation systems; [and] additional equipment”.⁴⁵² The United Kingdom would build the submarines that would carry them, and their warheads. The first of the four Resolution-class SSBNs, *HMS Resolution* (S22), was launched on 15 September 1966.⁴⁵³ The Polaris missile was fired from the vessel on 15 February 1968.⁴⁵⁴

The institutionalisation of the agreement has proved astonishingly durable. The Polaris Sales Agreement was amended in 1980 to permit transfer of Trident I (C4) missiles, and the framework was extended again in 1982 for Trident II (D5),⁴⁵⁵ the system upon which the submarines that constitute the present British deterrent are based. In each of these subsequent amendments, the operative clauses of Nassau and of the 1963 Agreement had been re-incorporated essentially unchanged. Assignment to NATO, supreme-national-interests escape clause, American technical support coupled with British operational sovereignty. The Dreadnought-class submarine programme, currently under construction at Barrow as the Vanguard replacement for service from the 2030s, is being developed under the same 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement,⁴⁵⁶ and the AUKUS partnership announced on 15 September 2021, under which Australia is to acquire nuclear-powered submarines through a trilateral arrangement with the United Kingdom and the United States,⁴⁵⁷ is itself an extension and reapplication of the framework whose foundational moment was Nassau.

The mythological survival of the “Special Relationship” was thus institutionalised. Initially a rhetorical operation, Macmillan’s lecture on the Anglo-American relations, his analogy of wartime, Kennedy’s concession against the advice

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Government of the United Kingdom Great Britain and Government of the United States of America, ‘Polaris Sales Agreement’, Washington, 6 April 1963.

⁴⁵² Ibid, Article 2.

⁴⁵³ James Jinks and Peter Hennessy, *The Silent Deep: The Royal Navy Submarine Service Since 1945* (Penguin UK, 2015), 192.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, 193. See Appendix F, Figure 20 for photo of Polaris being fired from *HMS Resolution*.

⁴⁵⁵ Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent. Volume I*, 12.

⁴⁵⁶ Claire Mills, *Replacing the UK’s Nuclear Deterrent: Progress of the Dreadnought Class* (House of Commons Library, 2025), 10, n5.

⁴⁵⁷ Nick Childs, ‘The AUKUS Anvil: Promise and Peril’, *Survival* 65, no. 5 (2023): 7–24.

of his own State Department, the drafting of the supreme national interests clause, became, in the months separating the Nassau Communiqué from the Polaris Sales Agreement, the permanent architecture of a relationship that would persist long after both protagonists had left the stage. The British Polaris force did not enter service until 1968. Macmillan would resign on 18 October 1963, his government undone by the Profumo affair, the Vassall tribunal, and his hospitalisation.⁴⁵⁸ Kennedy would be assassinated in Dallas on 22 November 1963.⁴⁵⁹ The “Camelot” iconography that Jacqueline Kennedy would impose, a week later, was therefore retrospective in two senses. It was retrospective on the Kennedy presidency as a whole, but also on Nassau. Nassau would be remembered as the moment at which the chivalric brotherhood of Anglo-American personal diplomacy reached its most consummate expression. Neither man lived to see the architecture they had built operate as the foundation of British strategic capability.

v. *Implications for the “Special Relationship” Today*

The argument advanced in this chapter has been that Skybolt-Polaris constitutes the most consequential single act of mythological repair in the post-war Anglo-American relationship. The Suez chapter ended with the observation that the recovery of the “Special Relationship” after 1956 was an act of mythological reconstitution rather than genuine repair. The same observation applies, with greater force, to Nassau. The structural reality that Skybolt exposed, that the British nuclear deterrent depended, and would continue indefinitely to depend, on American technological cooperation, was not altered at Nassau. The phrase “the independent British nuclear deterrent” survived the demonstration of dependence by absorbing dependence into itself. It redefined “independent” as, yes, national operational control over a missile system, but with the small print that it is manufactured and maintained by another power.

This linguistic-conceptual operation is, in Barthes’s sense, the definitive mythological move: it transforms “history into nature”.⁴⁶⁰ The dependence is structured and continuing, but the language of independence converts it into a feature of the natural British political order. Even contemporarily, the term “independent

⁴⁵⁸ Thorpe, *Supermac*, 613.

⁴⁵⁹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 1026.

⁴⁶⁰ Barthes, *Mythologies* 128.

nuclear deterrent” has not been wholly abandoned by Britain. “Operationally independent”⁴⁶¹ has been the dominant framing in recent official documents, alongside “national endeavour”. The term “national endeavour” describes the government’s current strategy to delivery of a nuclear deterrent.⁴⁶² Claiming “independence [that] is ultimately dependent upon the United States security guarantee,”⁴⁶³ is no longer a possibility in the digital and modern age. The carefully managed opacity of the 1960s information environment made this easier to obscure. Yet, the admission of dependence is still sidestepped. This is the legacy of Skybolt-Polaris.

⁴⁶¹ John Healy, Secretary of State for Defence, ‘Statement Made on 11 July 2025’, Hansard, 11 July 2025.

⁴⁶² Defence Nuclear Organisation, Ministry of Defence, *A National Endeavour: Nuclear as Part of the Defence Engine for Growth*, 23 April 2026,.

⁴⁶³ George Michael Dillon, *Dependence and Deterrence: Success and Civility in the Anglo-American Special Nuclear Relationship, 1962-1982* (Gower, 1983), 5.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to understand the “Special Relationship”. Does it exist? Has it survived? Is it “Special”? The answer to all of these questions is: yes. Yet, not for the reasons that one would think. Conventional alliance theory cannot explain why the term “Special Relationship” is still used in today’s headlines. After Suez, likely even after the war, the alliance would have ceased to exist. It served its purpose. Defeat the adversary, stabilise the global order, put into place framework for peacetime. The clear imbalance between Britain and the United States leaves no room for ambiguity. But the “Special Relationship” does exist. It has survived. And it is, indeed, “Special”. This is because it does not operate as an ordinary alliance, but on a symbolic, mythic, meta level.

The mythology of the “Special Relationship” is that it is a natural kinship that connects the United Kingdom and the United States, based on their shared characteristics and mutual understandings. Through Barthes’s concept of myth, historical events that occur throughout the lifetime of the relationship are elevated to symbols of this connection. Those who argue against the existence of the relationship, or insist that it is not unique, miss the point. It is not the material result of the alliance that explains why it has endured, but the belief system that encompasses it. And this system is founded on three intersecting lenses: the belief that Anglo-Saxonism is a *civilisational* community of like-minded individuals, with shared political, legal, intellectual, and social tradition; the belief that because of this, the United States and United Kingdom share an understanding of the values and *morals* with which to lead the Brave New World; and the belief that what was once Britain’s storied, *imperial* mantle has now been taken up by the United States. The conclusion from the analysis is that the strongest belief that has carried the “Special Relationship” throughout the decades, and supported the other lenses of mythology, has been the belief in a unique Anglo-Saxon civilisation.

The “Special Relationship” has survived the rupture of the Suez Canal Crisis and the near-miss of the Skybolt Crisis because it operates on a meta, mythological level. Even after Britain betrayed two of the core beliefs of the myth at Suez, the moral (the Sèvres Protocol) and the imperial (unilateral imperial action), the myth had the capacity to absorb this rupture because it does not operate at a material level. Eden

was thus scapegoated, remembered as a blip in the timeline of the “Special Relationship”. It was not until later, though, that Macmillan and Kennedy’s Nassau Negotiations fully repaired what had collapsed in Egypt. There was still a fear that the Skybolt Crisis could have been the next Suez. It was the untouched civilisational frame which the leaders harnessed at that summit, which smoothed over a near blowout fight. Macmillan and Kennedy understood the stakes, and that this relationship had been constructed above the levels of leaders. They understood the Anglo-Saxon civilisational community because they were living proof of it: Kennedy’s London days, Macmillan’s wartime service, side-by-side with American generals.

As much as the rhetorical and oratory tradition of the “Special Relationship” is significant, from Churchill’s speeches, the Atlantic Charter, to Macmillan’s speech at Nassau, even to King Charles III’s speech before Congress, what is equally significant is how this translates into architecture. The Atlantic Charter produced the United Nations and NATO, organisations and institutions that have survived and developed to this day (arguably). The Nassau communiqué produced the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement, structured Trident, and lingers in defence documentation today. Rhetoric hardens to treaty and still structures the strategic capabilities of Great Britain and America.

Yes, there still exists a serious material asymmetry between the nations. In the 2024/2025 financial year, the US spent \$954 billion on defence.⁴⁶⁴ Britain spent \$83.2 billion,⁴⁶⁵ roughly a tenth. US GDP is approximately 32 trillion; Britain’s is around 4 trillion.⁴⁶⁶ The US operates eleven nuclear-powered aircraft carrier strike groups, Britain two.⁴⁶⁷ One of these two aircraft carriers, the *HMS Prince of Wales*, was placed on a state of “advanced readiness”, seeming likely it would deploy to the Middle East in light of the conflict in Iran.⁴⁶⁸ To the current President’s ire, the ship

⁴⁶⁴ *Trends in World Military Expenditure*, 2025.

⁴⁶⁵ Esme Kirk-Wade, *UK Defence Spending*, 3 June 2026. Converted from £60.2 billion pounds.

⁴⁶⁶ ‘World Economic Outlook (April 2026) GDP, Current Prices’, accessed 4 June 2026.

⁴⁶⁷ Harrison Kass, ‘These Are the 14 Countries with Aircraft Carriers in 2026’, *The National Interest*, 15 February 2026.

⁴⁶⁸ ‘British Aircraft Carrier *HMS Prince of Wales* Prepped to Set Sail’, 7 March 2026.

pivoted to the Arctic to participate in NATO exercises.⁴⁶⁹ Rather embarrassingly, it now needs repairs.⁴⁷⁰

It is the context of these recent events that have hauled the “Special Relationship” into the interrogation room once more. Britain was supposedly graced with minimal tariffs by President Trump.⁴⁷¹ Once Britain refused to jump to aid America in its strikes on Iran, though, the President unleashed a slew of abuse on Truth Social, citing that Starmer “was not Winston Churchill”⁴⁷² and calling the “Special Relationship” into serious question. Once more, a test has been set. The relationship is under strain, with a narrative of betrayal deployed by President Trump. To President Trump, the moral dimension of the relationship has been violated in Britain’s hesitancy to take up arms against a belligerent. And once more, the civilisational narrative repairs the relationship, in the form of King Charles III’s speech to Congress.

King Charles is the second British monarch to address Congress, after his mother, Queen Elizabeth II. The timing of his speech was fortunate, for the King took advantage of the recent friction between the two nations to soothe relations. It is this speech that proves the “Special Relationship” is capable of endurance, of repair. The audience, the Vice President, the Speaker of the House, and a hall full of American congressmen and women, gave “standing ovations” with “laughter across both sides of the isle.”⁴⁷³ The civilisational language King Charles uses is almost like it has fallen out of Churchill’s speech drafts. “The very principle on which your Congress was founded—no taxation without representation—was at once a fundamental disagreement between us, and at the same time a shared democratic value which you inherited from us.”⁴⁷⁴ Anglo-Saxon political tradition, the concept of inheritance. The Magna Carta is mentioned, just as in Churchill’s rhetoric. “Our Nations are in fact instinctively like-minded—a product of the common democratic,

⁴⁶⁹ ‘RAF Jets Have Taken out Two More Drones in Middle East, Says John Healey’, 9 March 2026.

⁴⁷⁰ NavyLookout, *HMS Prince of Wales Remains in Norway for Repairs - Navy Lookout*, 30 May 2026.

⁴⁷¹ Inman et al., ‘UK “Working with US” to Analyse Impact of Supreme Court’s Ruling against Tariffs’.

⁴⁷² ‘Trump Says Starmer Is “no Winston Churchill” over Iran Strikes’, 3 March 2026.

⁴⁷³ Ashley Ahn, ‘This Time, the King’s Speech Was Full of Jokes’, U.S., *The New York Times*, 28 April 2026.

⁴⁷⁴ ‘The King’s Address to the Joint Meeting of Congress in Washington’, 28 April 2026.

legal and social traditions in which our governance is rooted to this day.”⁴⁷⁵ Shared legal, social, political practice. King Charles crystallises the myth: “The story of the United Kingdom and the United States is, at its heart, a story of reconciliation, renewal and remarkable partnership.” It is this speech that answers the questions that the thesis asked. Yes, it exists. Yes, it has endured. Yes—it is special. After all this time, the same formulation applies. Reconciliation, renewal—remarkable.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

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Appendices

A. Charts

1. What is the Special Relationship?

Cynical	Neutral	Mythological/Optimistic
A lie.	An attitude.	Shared values/moral alliance.
Asymmetric dependency.	An outcome of structural realities.	Cornerstone of Western Order.
Tool for US/UK policymakers.	Strategic consensus.	Legacy.
Purposefully vague.	Ethnic coalition.	Community.
Imperial heritage.	Linguistic/Cultural identity.	Link between the Old World and the New World.
Alliance of the elite.	Competitive Cooperation.	Ideological.
Adversaries make allies.	Personal relationships.	
	Diffused Nationalism.	

2. Phases of the Anglo-American Relationship

Phase	Date	Key characteristics
British Colonial America	1607-1783	British settlement in the North Americas.
Not-So-Special Relationship	1783-1895	Trade wars, boundary disputes, maritime conflict, war of 1812, Civil War.

The Great Rapprochement	1895-1915	Friendly diplomatic relations, economic interdependence.
“Cool” Estrangement	1915-1938	Economic conflict, US isolationism, League rejection.
“Special Relationship” Emerges	1938-1945	Churchill & Roosevelt friendship, Atlantic Charter, integrated strategy. Eponymous term coined in 1946.
Early Cold War Friction and Consolidation	1945-1956	Construction of the Western Order: NATO, Marshall Plan. Friction from McMahon Act & Suez
Post-Suez Reaffirmation	1956-1979	Mutual Defence Agreement, Nassau Agreement, MacMillan and Kennedy relationship.
Ideological Synergy	1979-1991	Maggie and Ron, Falklands. Star Wars, Gulf War.
War on Terror Alignment	1999-2009	Bush & Blair, the “Poodle”, joint interventionism, intelligence integration.
No Longer Special?	2009-2016	UK parliament rejects Syria intervention, US frustration with declining military spending. Obama & Cameron frostiness.
Shifting Ground	2016-present	Brexit, Indo-Pacific focus, Europe/US animosity with question of UK role, AUKUS, Trump.

3a. Themes and Concepts Shaping the Myth

The following concepts constitute the building blocks of the “Special Relationship” as a strategic narrative, shaping how mythological content is translated into political meaning and policy justification.

- a. Diffused Nationalism
 - The blending of national narratives and the idea that British political heritage “flows into” American democracy. Frames the relationship as an extension of shared national character.
- b. Linguistic/Cultural Identity
 - How shared cultural identity and an imagined “Anglo-Saxon community” narrative constructs an image of a transatlantic kinship.
- c. Personal Relationships
 - Interpersonal dynamics of leaders that drive public perceptions of closeness. Elevate episodic alignment into enduring myth. Equally a cold personal relationship can mark the period of the Special Relationship. (Churchill/Roosevelt, MacMillan/Kennedy, Thatcher/Reagan, Blair/Bush).
- d. Shared Values/Moral Alliance
 - Joint commitment to democracy, liberal order, human rights serve as moral justifications for convergence. Cooperation as an ethical obligation.
- e. Strategic Consensus
 - Periods of alignment on major geopolitical threats reinforce the image of a united strategic worldview.
- f. Ethnic Coalition
 - Historical narratives of Anglo-American kinship often draw on racialised ideas of shared ancestry and class identity. Shaped elite thinking.
- g. Adversaries Make Allies
 - The idea that the enemy of my enemy is my friend: what really drives the relationship is a common enemy: Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Terrorism, etc.
- h. Imperial Heritage

- Complex framing of the US as inheriting Britain’s global role. The Empire shaped Britain’s role as a great-power, and though the Americans were averse to colonialism, they implicitly inherited this role in a post-imperial setting.
- i. Alliance of the Elite
 - Myth is sustained through elite institutions whose shared worldviews (particularly on class) perpetuate a sense of exceptional partnership.
- j. Western Order
 - The “Special Relationship” is often framed as the spine of the liberal international order. Anglo-American cooperation is not merely bilateral, but foundational to the functioning of Western security structures such as NATO.

3b. Three Main Categories of Mythmaking

Civilisational	Ethnic Coalition	Adversaries Make Allies	Cultural/Linguistic Identity
Moral	Western Order	Strategic Consensus	Shared Values
Imperial-Historical	Imperial Heritage	Diffused Nationalism	(Historic) Personal Relationships

B. Chronologies

1. TIMELINE OF THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP⁴⁷⁶

i) NOT-SO-SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

1775—American Revolution.

1783—American Independence.

- Treaty of Paris.

1784—Jay Treaty (Treaty of Amity).

- Royal Navy seizes 300 American merchantmen near French West Indies.
- GB is supplying weapons to Native Americans.
- GB is impressing US sailors.
- Border with Canada was vague and needed to be defined: sent to arbitration.
- Occupation of forts in the Great Lake region: resolved.

1807—Rejection of Monroe-Pinkney Treaty.

1807—Chesapeake-Leopard Affair.

- Royal Navy is looking for deserters.
- *HMS Leopard* fires upon *USS Chesapeake*.
- Four crew members removed from vessel and tried for desertion.

1806/7—Orders in Council.

- Orders in Council 1806—blockade from Brest to Elbe.
- Berlin Decree from Napoleon.
- Orders in Council 1807—forbade French trade with Great Britain, its allies, or neutrals. All shipments in British controlled ports to be stopped and checked for military supplies that could be used by the French.

1807—Embargo Act.

- British impressment of sailors.
- Prohibition of the Importation of certain Goods and Merchandise from the Kingdom of Great Britain.
- Meant as a protective measure.

⁴⁷⁶ Chronology compiled from Kathleen Burk, *Old World, New World: Great Britain and America from the Beginning* (2009); H.C. Allen, *Great Britain and the United States: A History of Anglo-American Relations 1783–1952* (1955); Bradford Perkins, *The Great Rapprochement* (1968); David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937–41* (1981); John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq*.

1809—Non-Intercourse Act.

- Lifting of all embargoes on shipping with the exception of French and British.

1810—Macon's Bill No. 2.

- Lifted all embargoes for three months. If one belligerent ceased intercepting American shipping, US would embargo the other unless the other also agreed to cease intercepting American shipping.

1811—Little Belt Affair.

- Naval battle between *HMS Little Belt* and *USS President*.

1812—Henry Letters.

1812—War of 1812.

- Rule of 1756.
- British alliances with Native Americans (Tecumseh).
- 1813—Burning of York (Toronto).
- 1814—Burning of DC.
- 1815—New Orleans.

1814—Treaty of Ghent.

1818—Rush-Bagot Treaty.

- Demilitarisation of the Great Lakes.

1818—Anglo-American Convention.

- Joint occupation of Oregon.
- Border issues resolved.

1823—Monroe Doctrine.

- GB pushing this for other European powers.

1834—Slavery Abolition Act UK.

1834—Start of British investment into US railways.

1837—Caroline Affair.

- Upper Canadian Rebellion.
- GB set fire to vessel *Caroline*, 1 US fatality.

1842—Webster-Ashburton Treaty.

- More border issues resolved.
- Maine-New Brunswick Border.
- International border between Lake Superior and Lake of the Woods.

- Reaffirmation of the border.
- Shared use of the Great Lakes.
- End to slave trade on the high seas.

1846—Oregon Treaty.

1850—Clayburton-Bulwer Treaty.

- Any future canal in Latin America would remain neutral
- Avoidance of rivalry in Latin America.

1854—Reciprocity Treaty.

- Reduced tariffs with British North America.

1858—Cotton is King speech.

1861—Trent Affair.

- US Navy captures Confederates onboard a GB ship
- GB mobilises troops in Canada.

1861—GB Proclamation of Neutrality in American Civil War.

- 1861—British recognise “belligerent south”.
- 1861/2—Confederates purchase arms/warships in British shipyards through private British manufacturers.
- SOS Seward Anglophobe.
- 1861—Garibaldi celebrated in GB.
- 1861—Prince Albert’s note.

1869—Alabama Claims.

- For Confederate warships.

1871—Treaty of Washington.

- Peaceful relations between the US&UK.

1872—Geneva Arbitration.

- Tribunal rules GB to pay 15 million dollars in reparations.

1870s/80s—Anglo-American Trade Expansion.

1880—First Boer War (US Neutrality).

1880s/90s—Border & fisheries disputes.

ii) THE GREAT RAPPROACHMENT

1895—Venezuelan Boundary Crisis.

- Invocation of Monroe Doctrine against GB in Venezuela.

- Initial refusal from GB.
- Cleveland pushed for it.
- GB and VEN sign arbitration agreement, GB 90%.

1896—Cross of Gold Speech.

- Speech against gold standard, GB compared to “old” gold standard.

1897—Rejection of Olney-Pauncefote Treaty.

- All matters of major dispute to be settled by arbitration between US&UK
- Approved by President Cleveland, rejected by Senate.

1898—Spanish-American War.

- British non-interference, seen as permissiveness towards US.

1899—Second Boer War.

- US volunteers, Washington does not give support to Boers.

1899—Open Door Policy in China.

- British adoption of John Hay’s policy.

1901—Hay-Pauncefote Treaty.

- Legal preliminary to Panama Canal.
- GB withdraws objections to American-controlled Panama Canal.

1902—Venezuelan Blockade Crisis.

- Roosevelt non-application of Monroe Doctrine.
- Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague awarded preferential treatment to blockading powers, US feared encouragement of European intervention.
- Prelude to Roosevelt Corollary.

1903—Alaska Boundary Dispute.

- GB resolves border conflict between Canada and Alaska.
- Final resolution favours US border, Canadians angry.

1904—Roosevelt Corollary.

- Addition to Monroe Doctrine.
- “Big stick”.
- Right of the US to intervene in Latin American to intervene to stabilise the economic affairs of small states in Caribbean and Central America if they were unable to pay their international debts.

1907—Great White Fleet.

- Visits port in Trinidad.
- 1909—Roosevelt speech on empire.

1911—Taft Arbitration Treaties.

- US senate blocks.
- Continuation of Olney-Pauncefote—peaceful settlement of major disputes.

1914—Britain enters WWI, US neutral.

iii) “COOL” ESTRANGEMENT

1915—Sinking of RMS Lusitania.

- British passenger liner is sunk by German U-Boat, 128 American fatalities.

1916—National Defence Act.

- Significantly expanded and modernised US military.

1916—Black Tom explosion.

- Destruction of US-made munitions that were to be shipped to Allies, by German Naval Intelligence Officers in New York Harbour.

1917—Zimmermann Telegram.

1917—US joins WWI.

- Meuse-Argonne Offensive.
- Hundred Days Offensive.

1918—Armistice.

1919—Paris Peace Conference.

- Wilson & Lloyd George clash over severity of reparations and territorial settlements.

1920—US rejects League of Nations.

- Blow to British hopes of stable Anglo-American partnership.

1921—Washington Naval Conference.

- Naval arms limitations.

1922—Balfour Note.

- GB suggested to cancel all war-time debts, provided US does the same.
- Condemned by US.

1924—Immigration Act

- Johnson-Reed Act.
- A “distinct” American identity.

1926—Balfour Declaration.

- Colonies have equal status.
- US approved.

1927—Geneva Naval Conference.

- Intended extension of Washington Conference.
- British and American delegations unable to reach agreement.

1928—Kellogg-Briand Pact.

- Outlawed war as an instrument of national policy.
- Symbolic of attitudes but failed because lack of enforcement measures.

1929—Wall Street Crash.

- Highlighted economic interdependence.

1930—Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act.

- Undermined support for British free trade

1930—London Naval Treaty

- Extension of Washington Naval Conference.

1931—UK abandons Gold Standard.

- Benefitted UK economy, US felt it undermined global financial cooperation.

1931—Invasion of Manchuria.

- US firm diplomatic opposition, Stimson Doctrine.
- UK appeasement, hoped to avoid antagonising Japan because of British interests in Hong Kong, Singapore.

1932—Peak of Economic Depression.

1932—US election of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

- US recovery plans (New Deal) were unclear to British.

1933—World Economic Conference.

- Called by the US and the UK but collapsed when Roosevelt rejected currency stabilisation.

1935—Anglo-German Naval Agreement.

- Deal with Hitler, controversial because it was made without consulting allies.

1935—Second London Naval Treaty.

- Japan withdrew from the conference.

1937—*USS Panay* incident.

- Japanese bombing attack on the *USS Panay*.
- British aided in rescue missions & Chamberlain warned Japan.

iv) THE “Special Relationship” EMERGES

1938—Munich Conference.

- President Roosevelt sends telegram to Hitler expressing hope for peaceful settlement.

1939—Britain declares war on Germany.

- Created security context that later made Anglo-American alignment inevitable.

1940—Churchill becomes British PM.

- Churchill has a pro-American outlook and convinced that the war will be won with the US

1940—“We shall fight on beaches” speech.

- Boosted US public sympathy for Britain’s resistance.
- Helped shift American opinion away from isolationism.

1940—Destroyers-for-Bases Agreement.

- First major US strategic commitment to Britain before entering the war.
- 50 US Navy destroyers transferred from RN to USN.

1941—Lend-Lease Act signed.

- Authorised the president to lend and lease military supplies to any country deemed vital to the defence of the US Initially established to support GB.

1941—Atlantic Charter issued (Roosevelt & Churchill).

- Meeting took place in Placentia Bay.
- Outlined shared vision for the end after WWII, including principles like self-determination, free trade, and a post-war peace built on the abandonment of force.
- Embodiment of Special Relationship.

1941—US enters WWII, Pearl Harbour.

- Ended isolationism and made Britain and the US full military allies.

1941—Combined Chiefs of Staff.

- Created an unprecedented joint command structure directing Allied strategy.

1941—Arcadia Conference.

- Coordinated early war planning and established “Germany First” strategy, Combined Chiefs of Staff.

1942—Churchill addresses US Congress.

- Reinforced emotional and political solidarity between the nations.

1943—Casablanca Conference.

- Produced Casablanca Declaration of “unconditional surrender”.

1943—Quebec Conference.

- Resulted in Quebec agreement—sharing of nuclear technology between US and UK

1943—Tehran Conference.

- Shift of power toward US in Allied decision-making.
- GB had to adjust to a more junior role in strategy formation.

1944—D-Day (Operation Neptune)

- Pinnacle of military interoperability.

1944—Quebec Conference (2).

- Postwar planning and nuclear collaboration.
- Exposed tensions over GB weakening global position.

1944—Bretton Woods System established.

1945—Yalta Conference.

- Postwar peace with collective security and self-determination.
- Unity but began to reveal Cold War fault lines.

1945—VE Day.

- Celebration of joint Allied victory in Europe.

v) EARLY COLD WAR FRICTION

1945—Potsdam Conference.

- Shift in leadership (Attlee and Truman).
- US treated GB junior partner, institutionalised power shift.
- GB wanted firmer stance on USSR, Anglo-American front less cohesive.

1946—Churchill's Iron Curtain speech.

- Coined the phrase "Special Relationship".
- Identified united front against Soviet influence.

1946—Anglo-American Loan Agreement.

- GB economic dependence on US after war.
- Secured British recovery but asymmetric power.

1946—McMahon Act.

- Split from former cooperation on atomic energy.

1947—Truman Doctrine.

- Committed the US to global containment, replacing GB declining imperial role.
- But aligned Anglo-American interests against Soviet expansion.

1947—Marshall Plan.

- Massive US aid stabilised Europe and strengthened Western cohesion, GB benefitting most.

1948—Treaty of Brussels.

- Precursor to NATO.
- Demonstrated GB commitment to European Security.

1948—Berlin Blockade.

- Joint airlift proved Allied resolve under Soviet pressure.

1949—NATO created.

- Formalised military foundation of Special Relationship
- Gave GB permanent US security guarantee.

1950—Korean War begins.

- GB and US forces fight together in first major Cold War conflict.

1951—US ends Lend-Lease settlements.

- Strains Anglo-American economic ties.

1951—Churchill returns to power.

- Sought to revive close ties with Washington.

1952—UK tests first atomic bomb.

- Restores some British prestige within the alliance.

1953—Eisenhower & Churchill summit (Bermuda).

- Renewed efforts to restore wartime camaraderie.

- Path to Paris Agreements.
- Failed to fully resolve nuclear cooperation disputes.

1955—Warsaw Pact formed.

- Deepened institutional Cold War alignment.

1956—Suez Crisis.

- US intervention forced GB to withdraw.
- Greatest rupture in the “Special Relationship” and ended illusions of equality.

vi) POST-SUEZ REAFFIRMATION

1957—Sputnik.

- Shocked both nations but highlighted GB technological gap.

1957—Harold Macmillan becomes Prime Minister.

1958—US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement.

- Restored deep nuclear collaboration.
- Cemented long-term technological dependence on the US.

1960—U-2 incident.

- Spy plane scandal embarrassed Britain as a US intelligence partner.
- GB secretly authorised U2 missions from US RAF bases, not told Parliament.

1961—John F. Kennedy is elected President.

1962—Nassau Agreement.

- Gave Britain Polaris missiles, securing its deterrent after previous embarrassment when US withdrew nuclear commitment.

1964—Harold Wilson becomes PM.

- Refuses troops to Vietnam.

1965—Churchill’s funeral, Lyndon B Johnson does not attend.

1967—British pound devalued.

- Exposed Britain’s declining economic power.

1971—Nixon ends dollar-gold convertibility.

- Ends Bretton Woods and destabilises global currencies.

1973—UK joins the EEC.

- Shifts Britain’s economic focus to Europe.

- US feared reduced direct GB influence in DC.

vii) IDEOLOGICAL SYNERGY

1979—Thatcher becomes PM.

- Strong Atlanticist who favoured close US ties.

1981—Thatcher-Reagan first meeting.

- Established personal and ideological partnership.
- Sets tone for close cooperation.

1982—Falklands War.

- Early US hesitation reveals lingering tensions in alliance.
- US intelligence and logistics crucial to victory though.

1983—US invasion of Grenada.

- US exclusion of Britain from decision-making.
- “Margaret, it slipped my mind”.

1986—US bombing of Libya.

- GB allowed US bombers to use UK bases.

1989—Fall of Berlin Wall.

- Validated decades of shared Cold War policy.
- Where do we go from here?

1991—End of Gulf War.

- Successful joint military operation.
- Strongest post-WWII demonstration of coalition warfare.

1997—Tony Blair becomes PM.

- Renewed intense Atlanticism and alignment with US global leadership.

viii) WAR ON TERROR ALIGNMENT

1999 - NATO bombing of Yugoslavia.

- US-UK coordination central to NATO’s air campaign.

2001—9/11 attacks.

- UK immediate solidarity with US.
- Marks beginning of most intense era of intelligence and military cooperation.

2001—Invasion of Afghanistan.

- UK joined as US's closest combat partner.

2003—Iraq War begins.

- GB joins despite domestic opposition, fuelling “poodle” criticisms.

ix) NO LONGER SPECIAL?

2009/10—Cameron Government begins & Obama elected.

- More cautious, less intense UK&US relationship after embarrassment of Iraq.

2013—UK Parliament votes against Syria airstrikes.

- First major modern instance of Britain refusing US military plans.

2016—Brexit referendum.

- Generates US unease about GB reduced influence in Europe.
- Uncertainty about Britain's future strategic role.

x) SHIFTING GROUND

2020—US/UK disagreement over Northern Ireland Protocol.

2021—AUKUS pact announced.

- Deepened defence cooperation in submarines and Indo-Pacific security.
- Renewed strategic alignment in high-technology military domains.

2022—Russian invasion of Ukraine.

- US and UK emerged as leading supporters of Ukraine.

2024—Joint US/UK strikes on Houthi positions in Yemen.

2025—BBC panorama documentary fallout.

2026—Chagos Island deal controversy.

2026—Epstein files released.

- Andrew Mountbatton-Windsor and Lord Peter Mandelson arrested.

2026—Strikes on Iran, Keir Starmer hesitates to aid US

- “Special Relationship” no more?

2026—King Charles's Congressional Speech

2. NARRATIVE STRESS-TESTS IN THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

Period/Episode	Narrative Claim	Material Reality	Outcome for the Narrative
McMahon Act (1946)	Wartime nuclear partnership would cooperate into peacetime.	US unilaterally restricted nuclear cooperation.	Narrative contradiction. Trust damaged but myth preserved.
Korean War (1950-53)	Shared commitment to collective security and containment.	Britain contributed forces but had minimal influence over US war strategy.	Reinforced narrative
<u>Suez Crisis (1956)</u>	Britain and the US as equal partners in global leadership.	US economic and diplomatic pressure forced British withdrawal	Narrative collapse, exposed asymmetry.
<u>Skybolt Crisis (1962)</u>	Nuclear cooperation as symbol of equal status.	US cancellation of Skybolt undermined British deterrent.	Narrative redeployment to secure Polaris.
Vietnam War (1960s)	Close alignment in Cold War strategy.	Britain withheld troop support.	Selective narrative disengagement.
Iraq War (2003)	Moral and strategic unity.	Asymmetric influence and domestic backlash in UK.	Narrative convergence with reputational cost.
Syria Airstrikes Vote (2013)	UK as closest military ally.	British Parliament rejected participation.	Narrative survived but visibly hollowed.
Brexit (2016)	UK as America's primary European partner.	Reduced British leverage within Europe.	Narrative uncertainty, partial reorientation, greater British dependency on US.
Iran Strikes	UK as closest military ally	UK does not readily aid US, read as betrayal	Narrative under great strain

C. Dramatis Personae

British Principals

Attlee, Clement (1883–1967) Labour Prime Minister 1945–51.

Navigated the post-war institutionalisation of the Special Relationship, managing British financial dependence on the United States through the Marshall Plan, NATO negotiations, and the McMahon Act crisis.

Bevin, Ernest (1881–1951) Foreign Secretary 1945–51.

The principal British architect of NATO, channelling Western European security anxieties into the concept of a transatlantic alliance.

Caccia, Harold (1905–1990) British Ambassador to Washington 1956–61.

Confirmed to the Foreign Office that American financial assistance for sterling would not be forthcoming until Britain had made a definitive statement of withdrawal from Suez.

Churchill, Winston (1874–1965) Prime Minister 1940–45 and 1951–55.

Chief architect of the “Special Relationship” myth, deploying wartime rhetoric, personal diplomacy with Roosevelt, and subsequent historical writing to transform contingent strategic arrangements into a narrative of civilisational kinship. His “Sinews of Peace” address at Fulton, Missouri (1946) gave the relationship its canonical name and ideological framework.

Dean, Patrick (1909–1994) Senior British diplomat and Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee.

One of two British signatories of the Protocol of Sèvres (October 1956), dispatched by Eden to Paris in a failed attempt to retrieve and destroy all copies of the written collusion agreement.

Dill, Sir John (1881–1944) Field Marshal; senior British representative on the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington from 1941.

His close personal relationship with General Marshall transformed what might have been a merely formal structure into a genuinely functioning joint command, providing institutional substance for the myth of Anglo-American partnership.

Eden, Anthony (1897–1977)—Foreign Secretary 1935–38 and 1940–45 and 1951–55; Prime Minister 1955–57.

The central figure of the Suez Crisis, whose decision to authorise the tripartite collusion at Sèvres constituted a systemic violation of the Special Relationship’s moral narrative.

Gaitskell, Hugh (1906–1963) Leader of the Opposition 1955–63.

His evolution from qualified support for Eden’s stance to public denunciation of the Suez intervention as “an act of disastrous folly” illustrates the cross-party hold of the Special Relationship’s moral narrative.

Halifax, Lord (Edward Wood, 1881–1959) British Ambassador to Washington 1941–46.

An early proponent of a “special association” between Britain and the United States, contributing to the vocabulary from which Churchill’s canonical formulation was drawn.

Lloyd, Selwyn (1904–1978) Foreign Secretary 1955–60.

Eden’s principal diplomat throughout the Suez Crisis; present at the Sèvres negotiations. His Commons statement of 31 October 1956 that there was “no prior agreement” between Britain and Israel was a lie subsequently demolished by the Protocol’s declassification.

Macmillan, Harold (1894–1986) Minister Resident in North Africa 1942–45; Chancellor of the Exchequer 1955–57; Prime Minister 1957–63.

His wartime acquaintance with Eisenhower, forged in the Mediterranean, gave him the personal channel he used to reconstruct the “Special Relationship” after Suez. As Chancellor, he was both the loudest Cabinet advocate of force and the instrument of financial capitulation; his Greek-and-Roman metaphor is central to this thesis’s analysis of the imperial-historical mythological frame.

Nutting, Anthony (1920–1999) Minister of State at the Foreign Office; resigned in protest at the Suez operation.

His memoir ‘No End of a Lesson’ provides the most detailed British insider account of the Sèvres negotiations and the deliberate exclusion of the Foreign Office’s senior officials from knowledge of the collusion.

Sandys, Duncan (1908–1987) Minister of Defence 1957–59.

Author of the 1957 Defence White Paper, which restructured British defence around the independent nuclear deterrent and curtailed conventional forces. His paper created the dependency on American delivery systems that made Skybolt's cancellation a strategic crisis for Macmillan.

Shuckburgh, Evelyn (1909–1994) Assistant Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office under Eden.

His published diaries, 'Descent to Suez', record Eden's early invocation of the appeasement analogy and his personal confrontations with colleagues over Middle East policy, providing a contemporaneous record of the mythological thinking that shaped the crisis.

Wilson, Harold (1916–1995) Labour Shadow Chancellor.

His description of Macmillan as "first in, first out" of the Suez Crisis captured the central paradox of the myth's repair mechanism: that the man who had most loudly advocated intervention became its most effective terminator and subsequently its most skilled mythological reconstructor.

American Principals

Aldrich, Winthrop W. (1885–1974) US Ambassador to London 1953–57.

His dispatches to Washington documented the surge of anti-American sentiment among the British public and political class following Suez, and his testimony confirms that Dulles's pre-crisis communications gave Eden reason to interpret American ambiguity as tacit endorsement of force.

Dulles, John Foster (1888–1959) Secretary of State 1953–59.

The primary instrument of American diplomatic ambiguity during the Suez Crisis. His phrase that Nasser should "disgorge the Canal," extracted by Eden from its surrounding caveats, and his design of the Suez Canal Users' Association as a delaying mechanism disguised as an expression of allied solidarity, were the mechanisms through which Eden's mythological expectations produced strategic miscalculation. His hospitalisation in November 1956 elevated harder-line figures within the Eisenhower administration.

Eisenhower, Dwight D. (1890–1969) Supreme Allied Commander Europe 1943–45; President of the United States 1953–61.

The decisive American voice that destroyed Eden's position and severed the personal channel of the Special Relationship. His post-Suez reconstruction of the relationship with Macmillan demonstrates the myth's resilience, and the capacity to absorb catastrophe as personal error and re-naturalise the relationship around a new protagonist.

Goodpaster, Andrew (1915–2005) Staff Secretary to President Eisenhower.

His memoranda of White House conferences during the Suez Crisis provide the primary documentary record of Eisenhower's private contempt for the British and French intervention, capturing the administration's unrestrained internal language in contrast to its measured public and diplomatic communications.

Hoover, Herbert Jr. (1903–1969) Acting Secretary of State during John Foster Dulles's hospitalisation, November–December 1956.

He overruled Eisenhower's initial conciliatory instinct when Eden telephoned to propose a summit, insisting that any Anglo-American meeting must be preceded by a definitive British withdrawal from Egypt, formally severing the personal diplomatic channel.

Humphrey, George (1890–1970) Secretary of the Treasury 1953–57.

The architect of American financial coercion during Suez. His sounding-out by Macmillan at the September 1956 IMF meeting, without offering explicit guarantees, contributed to the British Chancellor's false confidence in American financial support. His subsequent imposition of conditions on sterling assistance was the decisive instrument of British capitulation.

Kennedy, John F. (1917–1963) President of the United States 1961–63.

His pre-political Anglophilia, shaped by his father's ambassadorship to London, his Harvard dissertation on British appeasement, and personal friendships with British aristocratic and political circles, provided the cultural raw material from which Macmillan constructed the civilisational and personal architecture of the Nassau settlement. His concession of Polaris at Nassau constitutes the central act of mythological repair examined in Chapter III.

Marshall, George C. (1880–1959) General of the Army; Secretary of State 1947–49.

His June 1947 speech at Harvard proposing European economic recovery aid gave Bevin the initiative to channel Western European support into an American commitment. The Marshall Plan, as the thesis argues, performed the same mythological operation as Lend-Lease, of transforming a relationship of dependency into a narrative of shared investment in liberal order.

McNamara, Robert S. (1916–2009) Secretary of Defence 1961–68.

His cancellation of the Skybolt air-launched ballistic missile programme in November–December 1962, without adequate communication of intent to London, precipitated the crisis that Nassau was convened to resolve. His “no-cities” strategic doctrine, which rendered the independent British deterrent strategically obsolete in American planning, formed the intellectual background to Skybolt’s cancellation.

Murphy, Robert D. (1894–1978) Deputy Under Secretary of State; one of Dulles’s closest advisers.

His memoirs provide a frank insider assessment that Dulles was never genuinely convinced of SCUA’s viability as an operational instrument, confirming the argument that the Association was designed as a diplomatic delaying device rather than a serious policy mechanism.

Roosevelt, Franklin D. (1882–1945) President of the United States 1933–45.

Co-creator with Churchill of the principal wartime instruments of the “Special Relationship” myth: the Atlantic Charter, the Lend-Lease framework, and the personal diplomatic correspondence whose volume and intimacy constituted a sustained textual performance of partnership. His sustained pressure on Churchill over Indian independence and imperial self-determination, however, reveals the anti-imperial dimension of American power that complicated the relationship’s civilisational and imperial-historical narratives from the outset.

Other Principals

Nasser, Gamal Abdel (1918–1970) President of Egypt 1956–70.

His nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company on 26 July 1956 was the first-order historical sign that Eden transformed, through the appeasement analogy, into a

second-order mythological signifier of totalitarian aggression. His Alexandria speech, delivered in the colloquial Arabic of the streets and invoking the memory of Egyptian labourers who died building the Canal, constitutes the counter-narrative of post-colonial sovereignty against which Eden's imperial-historical frame was deployed.

D. Glossary

Myth (Barthesian): In Roland Barthes’s semiological framework, myth is a second-order signifying system in which historically contingent and politically constructed meanings are presented as natural, timeless, and self-evident. Myth operates by turning “history into nature”.

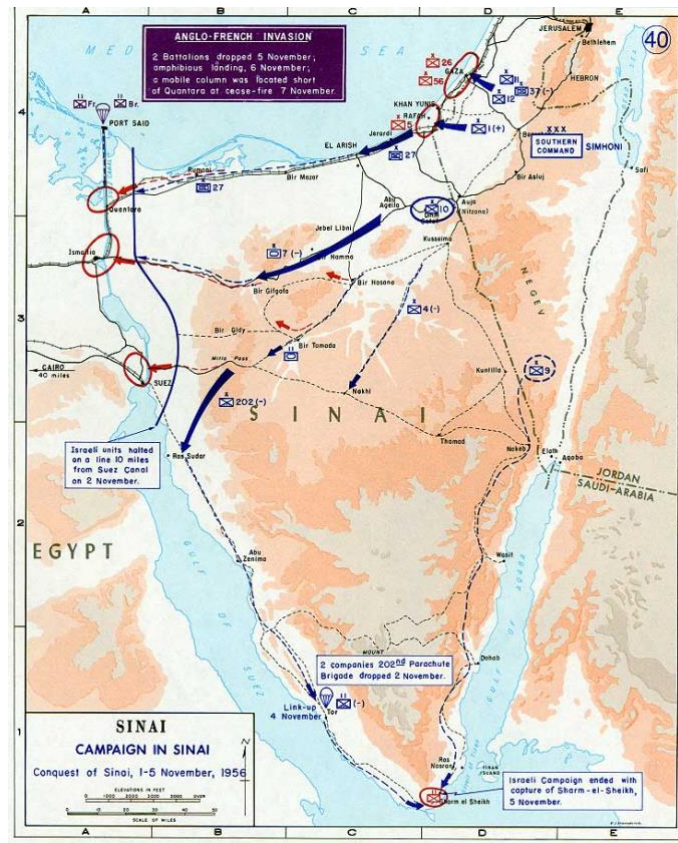
First-order signification: The literal level of meaning in a sign: what something empirically depicts or describes. The raw material from which the myth is constructed.

Second-order signification: The level at which myth operates, transforming first-order signs into vehicles for ideological meaning. A first-order sign (historical event, a diplomatic gesture, a personal friendship) becomes a second-order signifier when it is consciously or unconsciously deployed to naturalise a broader set of values or claims.

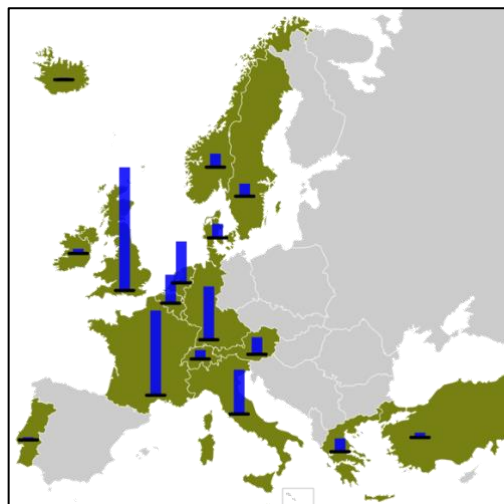
Naturalisation: The mythological process by which what is historically constructed is made to appear inevitable. The central operation of Barthesian myth.

Mythological register: As used in this thesis, a recurring discursive mode through which the “Special Relationship” is articulated and reproduced, specifically the civilisational, moral, and imperial-historical frameworks identified in the introduction.

E. Maps and Graphs



Map 1. Anglo-French para drops on the Suez Canal and Israeli conquest of Sinai, Wikimedia Commons, 1956.



Graph 1. Map of Cold-War era Europe, countries that received Marshall Plan aid. The blue columns show the relative amount of total aid per nation, Wikimedia Commons, 2009

F. Photographs



Figure 1. The HMS Prince of Wales off Newfoundland, after bringing Prime Minister Winston Churchill across the Atlantic to meet with US President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Wikimedia Commons, 1941.



Figure 2. Atlantic Conference Between Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin D Roosevelt, Wikimedia Commons, 1941



Figure 3. President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill seated on the quarterdeck of HMS Prince of Wales for a Sunday service during the Atlantic Conference, Wikimedia Commons, 1941

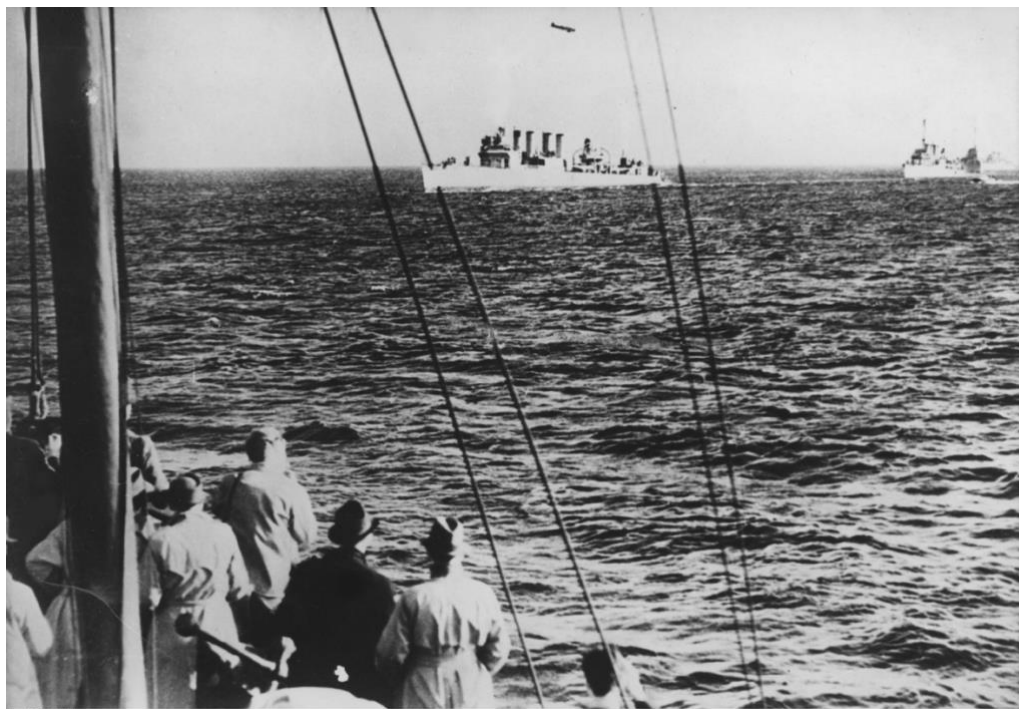


Figure 4. Transferred destroyers sailing into British port, Wikimedia Commons, October 1940



Figure 5. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signing H.R. 1776, the lend-lease bill to give aid to Great Britain, China and Greece, Wikimedia Commons, 1941



Figure 6. Franklin D. Roosevelt and Churchill in Casablanca, Wikimedia Commons, 1943



Figure 7. Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt at the Casablanca Conference, Wikimedia Commons, 1943



Figure 8. From left to right: Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill on the portico of the Soviet Embassy during the Tehran Conference, Wikimedia Commons, 1943



Figure 9. Screencap from newsreels depicting Nasser's Suez nationalisation speech, from 'Egypt and Gamal Abdel Nasser', National Archives, 1956



Figure 10. Smoke rises from oil tanks beside the Suez Canal hit during the initial Anglo-French assault on Port Said, Wikimedia Commons, 1956



Figure 11. The ominous and death-like figure of Destiny shows Eden the way, David Low, Manchester Guardian, 1956



Figure 12. Anthony Eden walking away from 10 Downing Street, Churchill Book Collector, 1956



Figure 13. Joe Jr., Kick, and Jack walking to the Palace of Westminster in London, to hear Great Britain declare war on Germany, JFK Presidential Library, 1939



Figure 14. Allied leaders in the Sicilian campaign. General Eisenhower (left) meets in North Africa with (top row) Mr. Harold Macmillan, Wikimedia Commons, 1943



Figure 15. US President Dwight D. Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan meet for talks in Bermuda, partly to repair Anglo-American relations after the disastrous Suez Crisis of the previous year, Wikimedia Commons, 1957



Figure 16. President John F. Kennedy with Prime Minister Harold Macmillan of Great Britain in Bermuda, Cecil Stoughton, Wikimedia Commons, 1961



Figure 17. President John F. Kennedy meets with Prime Minister of Great Britain Harold Macmillan (right) inside Government House in Hamilton, Bermuda, Wikimedia Commons, 1961



Figure 18. President Kennedy and Prime Minister Macmillan sat together in the Garden at the Nassau Summit, JFK Library, 1962.



Figure 19. Douglas GAM-87/AGM-48 Skybolt, Wikimedia Commons



Figure 20. A Polaris A3 missile test-fired from HMS Resolution, Jinks and Hennessy, 'The Silent Deep', 15 February 1968.

Pledge of Honesty

“On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorised assistance on it.”