

The New Criterion

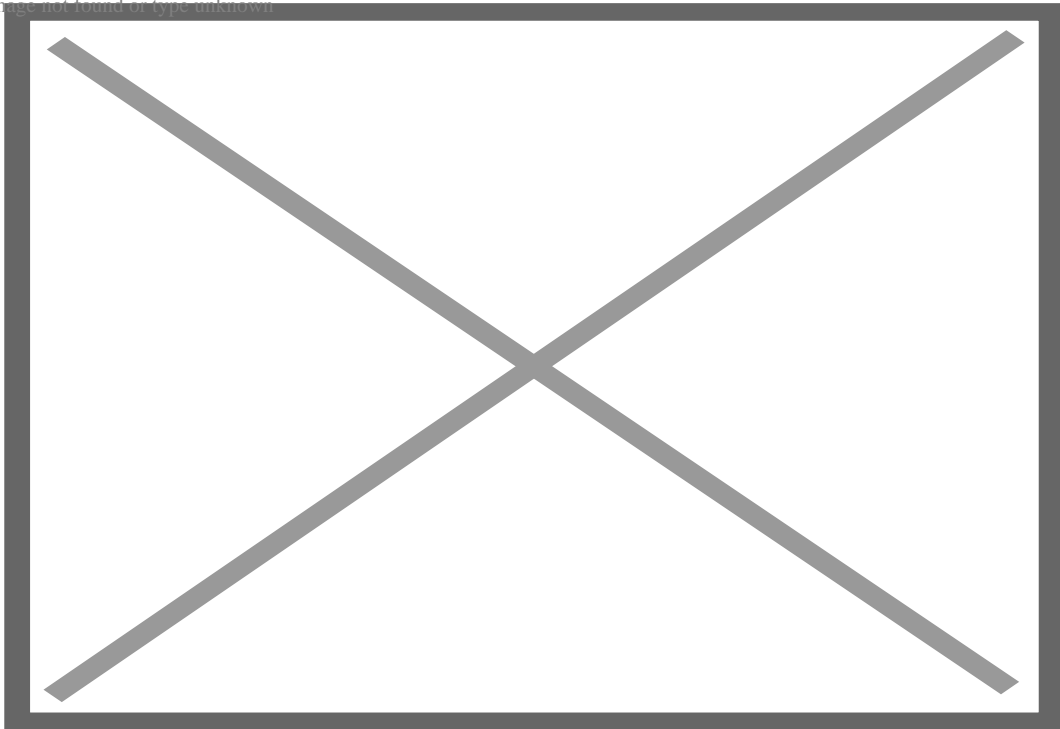
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Introduction: Reagan, Thatcher & the “Special Relationship”

by Roger Kimball

An overview of “Reagan, Thatcher & the future of the ‘Special Relationship,’” a symposium organized jointly by The New Criterion and London’s Social Affairs Unit

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For more than a decade now, *The New Criterion* has collaborated with London’s Social Affairs Unit on an annual conference touching on some aspect of the great trans-Atlantic conversation between Britain and the United States, whose people, Churchill once coyly observed, are separated by a common language.¹ Previous colloquies have focused on such subjects as the place of religion in Britain and America, the future of the nation state, the strength of the Anglosphere, the rise of a new statism, the “culture wars” that have redefined some basic features of our self-understanding, and what Pope Benedict XVI called “the dictatorship of relativism.” In planning this year’s conference, we had already decided to take the “Special Relationship” between

Britain and America as our theme when we got the sad news that Margaret Thatcher had died, age eighty-seven. The passing of that great political leader prompted us to refocus our discussion: It would still center around the special relationship, but would give prominence to that moment in the 1980s when the bonds between Britain and America enjoyed a recrudescence thanks to the collaboration of Thatcher and that other great warrior for freedom, Ronald Reagan.

Although, as John O'Sullivan reminds us in his essay below, the relationship between Reagan and Thatcher endured its share of tensions, strains, and disagreements, it was, on essential matters, close and productive. The United States offered quiet, sometimes grudging, but ultimately vital support to Britain during the Falklands Crisis, and Britain reciprocated when Reagan most needed support. And on the largest issue—the battle against the enormity of Soviet totalitarianism—they were at one in principle even if they occasionally differed about strategy. The single greatest victory of the period—the bloodless end to the Cold War—was brought about in largest measure because of the policies pursued by Reagan and Thatcher (with an assist, as John O'Sullivan further reminds us in his book *The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister*, by John Paul II).

In the popular imagination “the special relationship” is an alliance forged and tested in the war against Hitler, but its history (to allude a final time to John O'Sullivan) stretches back to the premiership of Lord Salisbury in the 1890s and stretches forward, albeit haltingly, to today. Margaret Thatcher was stating a fact, not indulging in hyperbole, when she observed that “The Anglo-American relationship has done more for the defense and future of freedom than any other alliance in the world.”

If there is one theme that emerges from the chorus of the essays that follow, it is that the “special relationship” between Britain and the United States is much more than a political or military alliance, more even than a relationship between two polities. At bottom, it is an alliance of values that encompasses not just Britain and the United States but the whole of what James Bennett has popularized as “the Anglosphere,” that loose association of countries that enjoy English as their primary language and whose political heritage is the privileged beneficiary of English freedoms. The free market. An emphasis on individual liberties over state power. Freedom of religion. Freedom of conscience and its objective correlative, free speech. Equality before the law. These are some of the distinguishing marks of Anglospheric identity. Geographically, the Anglosphere spans the globe, including India and Commonwealth Caribbean countries as much as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It rests, as Madhav Das Nalapat put it in a previous symposium, on a unity of ideas, “the blood of the mind” rather than “the blood of the body.” Its force is more intangible than physical—set forth primarily in arguments rather than armies—but is no less powerful for that. In this sense, the “Anglosphere” names an aspiration more than a political association. The special relationship between Britain and America stands at the center of that constellation of ideas, but in principle, like the medieval image of the deity, is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

Aristotle once defined man as the rational animal. I sometimes wonder if “the ungrateful animal” would not be closer to the truth. We beneficiaries of the Anglosphere find it difficult to acknowledge, let alone pay homage to, the many blessings the motor of the Anglosphere has bequeathed to us. The unprecedented prosperity, technological prowess, physical security, and personal freedom that is the lot of billions of people around the world is neither an accident nor a product of collectivist or utopian zeal. It is a coefficient of our participation in the seemingly modest canons of British liberty. That tradition, though robust, is under concerted assault today, in part from alien enemies of freedom, in part from its privileged beneficiaries at home. In his essay on “The British Character” in *Soliloquies in England*, George Santayana described “the Englishman” as “a steady and sane oracle amongst all the deliriums of mankind. Never since the heroic days of Greece has the world had such a sweet, just, boyish master. It will be a black day for the human race when scientific blackguards, conspirators, churls, and fanatics manage to supplant him.” By “Englishman” we can read any subscriber to the central values of the Anglosphere, even so exotic a specimen as the Spanish-born cosmopolite George Santayana.

The campaign being waged by those “blackguards, conspirators, churls, and fanatics” is unending and takes many forms. It was, in multiple senses, a small thing when President Obama, soon after taking office in 2009, unceremoniously sent back a bust of Winston Churchill that had stood in the Oval Office. But the symbolism of that act was pregnant with repudiation. What did it mean? What did it mean when the President presented Queen Elizabeth with an iPod loaded with photos from his inauguration and his early political speeches, or gave Gordon Brown, then Prime Minister, a collection of dvds that could not be played on British equipment?

The essays collected below present an admonitory but tonic challenge to what Daniel Hannan calls the “hierarchy of victimhood” being promulgated by the forces of pseudo-multiculturalism, whose chief article of faith is the suppression of individual liberty in the name of this week’s spurious utopian grievance. In balance, these essays are sanguine, not optimistic. Optimism is the shallow vice of Dr. Pangloss. The robust alternative is the virtue of deeds, not abstract principles, the assertion of cultural confidence that comes from a quiet, unassuming embrace of local freedom and individual prerogative. “Civilizations,” observed the political philosopher James Burnham, “die, in truth, only by suicide.” If the special relationship that is the subject of the following reflections could be distilled to a single imperative, it would meet Burnham’s sage observation with the instruction: Choose life.

Notes

1 “Reagan, Thatcher & the future of the ‘Special Relationship,’ ” a symposium organized jointly by *The New Criterion* and London’s Social Affairs Unit, took place on October 4, 2013 in New York City. Participants were James Bennett, Jeremy Black, Douglas Carswell, Daniel Hannan, Daniel Johnson, Roger Kimball, Herbert I. London, Michael Mosbacher, John O’Sullivan, James Piereson, David Pryce-Jones, Peter Robinson, and Keith Windschuttle. Discussion revolved around earlier versions of the essays printed in this special section.

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