

Think
new things
Make
new connections

Anglo-American Relations at Ditchley: a Digest in 1,000 Words

By Thomas Cryer

Since being founded in 1958 as an ‘educational centre for the study of Anglo-American relations,’ few phrases have echoed around Ditchley as frequently as the ‘special relationship.’ A term popularised by Winston Churchill to reflect Britain and America’s perceived common experiences, cultures, and values, Ditchley participants have subsequently tested, criticised and reformulated this ‘special relationship’ over fifty-nine years of global geopolitical change, creating an archive of Director’s Notes and Annual Lectures that sheds a unique light on Anglo-American diplomatic history. This digest summarises a piece written by Thomas Cryer (Archives Intern, 2021) surveying the Anglo-American relationship more extensively, which can be found at [From the Archives | Ditchley Foundation](#)

Anglo-American ties have long held a pivotal place in Ditchley’s history. In 1933, Ditchley was purchased by the Anglo-American Conservative MP for Harborough, Ronald Tree. Alongside his first wife Nancy, Tree turned Ditchley into a prominent meeting place for British and American guests.

Most famously, Winston Churchill visited Ditchley thirteen times from 1940 to 1943, having been warned that both Chequers and Chartwell were vulnerable to Luftwaffe bombings. Churchill’s notable guests included several prominent Cabinet members and the U.S. Secretary of Commerce W. Averell Harriman. It was also during several late-night discussions at Ditchley that Churchill and FDR’s chief diplomatic aid Harry Hopkins ironed out the details of Lend-Lease, an extensive American aid program that provided \$31.4 billion in food, oil, and armaments to Britain’s war effort. Ditchley was, therefore, a key catalyst in precisely that war-time convergence of Anglo-American interests that led Churchill to popularise the term ‘special relationship’ in March 1946. It seemed, later recalled Tree, that ‘there was a general sense of something new and big in the air.’

Ditchley’s early Annual Lecturers consequently spoke effusively of the Anglo-American relationship’s importance. In his preface to Ditchley’s Inaugural Annual Lecture, Sir John Wheeler-Bennett observed that ‘no less a thing than the peace of the world may depend upon it and even, perhaps the survival of mankind.’ This rarely, however, quietened a certain scepticism, with H.V. Hodson’s Inaugural Annual Lecture emphasising that Britain and America’s material capacities and interests were ‘far more contrasted than alike.’

Remarkably, this first Annual Lecture set the tone for most subsequent Ditchley discussions of the Anglo-American relationship. Since 1962, Ditchley participants have continually emphasised the Anglo-American relationship’s instability, fragility, and adaptability,

DITCHLEY

understanding it as a diplomatic tie to not think *of*, but *with*. Like Hodson then, Ditchley participants have therefore emphasised that this relationship cannot be presumed to be timeless and innate, nor can it be studied with sole regard for one particular facet of the relationship or in isolation from the other diplomatic ties, European or hemispheric, which both nations struggle to balance. In the words of John Kerry's 2017 Annual Lecture, it has always been a 'living, breathing, multi-faceted endeavour.'

The Anglo-American ties celebrated at Ditchley were rooted in three fundamental dynamics. First, the belief that American aid offered Britain the military, economic and diplomatic support necessary to stage the strongest defence against Soviet aggression in Europe. Second, the British recognition that it could no longer unilaterally protect its interests given its declining global status and that America, of all nations, most closely shared its beliefs and aims. As the celebrated journalist Edward Murrow declared in a 1963 Ditchley conference, this dynamic was ultimately rooted in 'a longing to live in the same kind of world.' Finally, the belief, arising from persistent suspicion regarding European political integration, that Anglo-American cultural, ideological, and historic ties created a natural, implicit and unrivalled trust. The two powers could consequently present a shared front that would tacitly influence the European Union and steer global decision-making.

As for the special relationship's sceptics, Ditchley participants have frequently argued that a declining Britain rarely contributed equitably to shared military efforts or that, conversely, America's hubris has alienated its British and European allies, especially following the Iraq War. Particularly recently, many have argued that the USSR's collapse erased the post-war relationship's founding impetus, making the Anglo-American relationship merely one more relic of the post-war order that requires adjustment within our more complex multipolar world.

Indeed, Ditchley discussants have consistently understood the Anglo-American relationship as a critical pivot within wider multilateral relationships including the 'Anglosphere,' the 'Atlantic Alliance' or simply 'The West.' Particularly in Ditchley's first decades, Commonwealth lecturers continually expanded the 'special relationship' to the broader Anglosphere. Many recent British speakers have argued that the Anglo-American relationship can still spur multilateral responses to global issues including climate change. Finally, a consistent realist streak that can be traced back to Hodson has argued that the special relationship has frequently been more rooted in sentiment than in a consistent conjunction of tangible interests, or that power asymmetries have rendered it more important for London than Washington.

Ultimately, whilst many Ditchley Lecturers have followed Hodson in consciously adopting a dispassionate, 'anatomist'-esque mode of analysis, few have doubted the Anglo-American connection's global significance or symbolic appeal. Geopolitical realism represents the point of departure but rarely the final horizon. Nor have Ditchley's storied Anglo-American roots quietened criticism of this relationship. Consequently, whilst Ditchley increasingly looks towards more diverse and wide-ranging subject matters, no single topic has been the subject of more Annual Lectures. Indeed, the most frequent Annual Lecturer nationality remains appropriately tied between American and British.

If anything, Ditchley's many recent conferences on President Trump's America reveal that Anglo-American ties are critical enough to be discussed with a necessarily frank sincerity, 'thinking new things and making new connections' in the best of the Ditchley spirit. From educational exchanges to cultural interchanges, many of the Anglo-American relationship's deeper undercurrents survive therein, stubbornly regardless of contemporary politics' present whims.

In short, America remains the most influential of all Britain's possible allies despite some of the most consequential sixty-some years in geopolitical history. This alliance's stubborn persistence has created, for better or for worse, a 'living, breathing, multi-faceted' allegiance that Ditchley participants have always maintained remains worth defending. To recognise this, one only needs to imagine how different Britain's twentieth century would be without it.