

Colman, Jonathan. *A 'Special Relationship'? Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson and Anglo-American Relations 'at the summit', 1964-68. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004. 192pp.*

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From the moment the images of 9/11 reached the UK from across the Atlantic and the War on Terror began to take shape, the Anglo-American relationship has been an almost omnipresent topic of diplomatic conversation. With Tony Blair unfavourably and frequently portrayed in the media as a lackey, apologist and poodle for the Bush administrations hawkish desires, it is clear that some feel that the current bond is not characterised by as much mutual respect as perhaps it could be. However, regardless of whether the current situation marks a low point for Britain in the relationship on a broader scale, the strong personal bond between the two men cannot be denied – whether it's the ready informality between them (Yo, Blair!) or the suggestion that they are as bound together by a common faith as they are by common interests.

Jonathan Colman's *A 'Special Relationship'? Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson and Anglo-American Relation 'at the summit', 1964-68* demonstrates that such closeness between Presidents and Prime Ministers has not always been the case. The book's title is not just a reference to the six summit meetings that took place between the two leaders but also an ironic allusion to the perception that this period marked a nadir for the twentieth century 'special relationship' (following as it did the heights of the Kennedy-Macmillan era) and produced a diplomatic slump between the two nations that would have to wait for Thatcher and Reagan to remedy.

Colman's primary preoccupation here is to explore how the personalities of Wilson and Johnson influenced their relationship, and thus the relationship between their nations. Colman's good use of diary sources and other recently released documents – from leaders, Ministers, Secretaries of State, Ambassadors and all manner of other political luminaries – means that he rarely has to put much more than an apocryphal word into anyone's mouth, allowing the reader to closely analyse the different language at work in the three main levels of diplomacy: what leaders say to each other, what they say to their aides in private and, last and perhaps least, what they say to their public.

By constructing the book summit-by-summit, and thus keeping faith with his witty title, Colman's arguments have an obvious, and at times ponderous, chronological flow to them. It's simplicity also reveals the PhD thesis from which the book grew, but given the events that characterised this period in the 'special relationship' – the devaluation of Sterling, Britain's retreat East of Suez and increasing American involvement in Vietnam – the book as a whole may have benefited from a more thematic structure.

However, the summit structure allows the book to sit comfortably amongst other

literature that examines summits within their diplomatic context, as well as with other works that cover the ‘special relationship’ more generally. Also, it does serve to flesh out the personal relationship between the two men rather than to get too deeply engaged in the issues that arose during their overlapping tenures.

Wilson, for some sentimental and some purely pragmatic reasons, had decided to ally himself very closely with Johnson, and wanted to keep close contact with the President. Johnson, who was far more used to using the telephone as an instrument for bullying and browbeating domestic politicians rather than as the first point of call for international relations, did not take kindly to Wilson’s approach and did not reciprocate, at least in private, Wilson’s fondness and respect for the President as an individual. Johnson even referred to Wilson as ‘a little creep’ who was ‘too clever by half’.

What Colman’s book does prove, although he wisely avoids any comparison with the present climate, is that even when relationships between leaders seem decidedly dour, the broader ‘special relationship’ nonetheless persists. Wilson’s particular misfortune was not so much that Johnson found him objectionable, but that he was Prime Minister when it became finally apparent that Britain’s projection of itself as a ‘Great Power’ was illusory – a fact that Wilson himself had grasped some time before it truly sunk in with Johnson – and that therefore her function as primary ally of the US (now dutifully reclaimed) was untenable. Wilson being ‘a little creep’ just didn’t help to sugar the pill for Johnson. These assertions and the general topic of Colman’s book are well trodden academic ground, but what is fresh in this work is the breadth of quoted materials that reveals the personalities behind the diplomacy - for this reason alone the book makes interesting reading.