

[Back to index](#)**Interpreting Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century****Mark Curtis, *The Great Deception: Anglo-American Power and World Order* (London: Pluto Press, 1998) ISBN 0-7453-1239 X hbk. pp.260.****Donette Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) ISBN 0-333-75382-8 hbk. pp.220.****Ritchie Ovendale, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998) ISBN 0-333-59613-7 pbk. pp.202.****by Andrew Priest  
University of Birmingham**

All three books attempt to a greater or lesser extent to re-evaluate modern Anglo-American relations, as well as assess the overall strength and impact of the so-called "special relationship". Mark Curtis and Ritchie Ovendale have produced broad studies which strive to achieve a fundamental understanding of the relationship across time, although in very different ways. Donette Murray's work is more specific, concerning itself with a pivotal period at the beginning of the 1960s, yet she still attempts to see the Skybolt incident and rise of Multilateral Force (MLF) in the context of a decline in relations between Britain and America.

Murray asserts that her study, "presents the most complete and up-to-date account and analysis of the Skybolt crisis and MLF controversy" (p.5). She may well be correct; the book is certainly a very credible synthesis of the issues. Description of Kennedy and Macmillan's personal rapport at the beginning of the work is fascinating, especially as the author emphasises Macmillan's suspicion of the young President before the latter came to power (pp.21-25). She cannot deny, however, that by the time of the Nassau conference in December 1962 the two leaders had developed a strong rapport, despite the on-going inter-governmental rift over the cancelled missile. She goes further in developing the notion that beneficent personal relations at the top disguised decline in the special relationship at this time.

In other areas, recently declassified material has been used to good effect. This is particularly true of sources concerned with British Defence Secretary Peter Thorneycroft and US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. It seems that the two discussed the possibility of Britain gaining Polaris as an alternative to the cancelled Skybolt missile *before* the Nassau conference commenced, suggesting that their respective inability to communicate with each other over Skybolt was soon rectified. This revelation also implies that both parties knew what was likely to be the final outcome of the conference as it commenced, which may go some way to explain why Kennedy and Macmillan were able to come to a deal relatively swiftly.

Of the summit itself, Murray provides much information, although her analysis is sometimes weak. She is content simply to conclude that Nassau was the "apogee of Anglo-American defence relations in the post-war era" (pp.92-93), highlighting the difficulty of producing an agreement and the successful outcome. The two leaders emerge from this study particularly well. Praise is given to Kennedy who, according to

Murray, trod a fine line between different interest groups within his administration and chose to emphasise US ties with Britain at the expense of those with France. Similarly, Macmillan's acquisition of US concessions is viewed as wily and astute. Although she does acknowledge that the agreement was "intolerably vague," (p.151) this would appear to have benefited Macmillan.

The real drawback with this book is its limited scope. Murray attempts to broaden the issues and present her work as a critique and reinterpretation of general Anglo-American relations, but this is not sustained in the conclusion which essentially repeats much of what has already been said about Skybolt and Nassau without placing it in a broader context. Because the study area is concerned only with Kennedy's presidency, it takes little account of developments after his death, although Murray clearly sees the Macmillan-Kennedy tie as essential to the special relationship, concluding that it now merely "lingers" (p.158).

Although he does not cover Skybolt, Nassau or MLF in his book *The Great Deception*, it would no doubt have provided Mark Curtis with further material to illustrate concerted attempts by British and US governments to ensure that world order is maintained in their favour. Curtis provides us with a polemic against what he appears to believe is an Anglo-American conspiracy perpetuating "imperial" ties with Third World countries based on economic and political exploitation. To this end, he presents numerous examples focusing particularly on the Middle East and United Nations.

At first glance the author is very persuasive in his arguments. His writing is lucid and readable, but on closer inspection there are some notable flaws in his thesis. Firstly, Curtis suspects that the conspiracy runs very deep: politicians, security services, the media, as well as "former officials and absurdly sycophantic academics" (p.17) are all implicated. The only people not tarred with his brush are so-called "independent" academics. What defines them as being "independent" is never made clear, although the implication is that they simply think along similar lines to the author. Curtis follows in the tradition of Noam Chomsky and also cites Gabriel Kolko as a major influence, but he has gone further than either of these by raising the status of the United Kingdom on the world stage to that of the United States. This is another contentious point. He claims that the traditional image of Britain as a "bit player" is false because of its role as nuclear power, financial centre and source of foreign investment (p.2). He entirely ignores the impotence of the British military machine as compared to the US and ultimately British reliance on them for the capability it possesses. Indeed, if a strong Anglo-American special relationship exists up to the present, as the author suggests in contrast to Murray, then the reason is not because Britain "opted" for it (p.19), but rather because it was absolutely necessary to maintain any sort of world role. Furthermore, there is no attempt to understand the de-colonisation process in its fullest context, that is the decline of Britain as a global power with all the tensions and recriminations it inevitably produced.

This leads to further criticism, namely that much of the blame directed at both Britain and the US is due to Curtis' belief that, as important modern world powers, their responsibility on the world stage increases exponentially. "If we were to look at the world with honesty, we would clearly see that the United States and Britain are responsible for the most basic and routine flouting of international law", he states (p.5). He strongly believes that both Britain and the US shoulder more responsibility because of their enhanced world role. Although this certainly has a good deal of resonance, especially for the US, he seems happy to gloss over the fact that numerous other countries, both developed and developing, ignore convention in the same way (he does

mention French influence in the UN, however). The US may see itself as a kind of international upholder of democracy, whatever kind of democracy that may be, but to suggest that it should sit back and watch when its economic or political position is threatened in a particular part of the world seems a little naive.

It is a shame that Curtis has chosen to take such a strong tone, because his book is wide-ranging and detailed. With a more careful and moderate approach he could have produced a far more credible work. He is certainly correct in stressing the undemocratic and corrupt regimes both countries have upheld to further their economic interests, as well as the importance of these two countries in setting up, for example, the World Bank in their own image. His detailing the fallacy that is current British "ethical" foreign policy is also impressive. It is simply his assertion that an Anglo-American monolith exists in key strategic areas requires selecting sources and incidents which fit. He barely mentions schism within the Anglo-American alliance; the Suez crisis, for example, is dismissed in a paragraph with the suggestion that if the UK had acted quickly the US would have had to support them. Similarly, he stresses official UK support for US policy in Vietnam and tacit SAS assistance to Australian and New Zealand forces, conveniently omitting continued British trade with North Vietnam and Harold Wilson's refusal to send troops to the area.

Curtis emphasises the credibility of this study because it is based on recently declassified documents, despite the fact that the reference list comprises almost entirely secondary sources. Moreover, there is some irony in his detailing the catalogue of, for example, British involvement with autocratic and repressive regimes in the Gulf when he relies primarily on British newspaper reports to do it. Presumably, these reports were produced by the same journalists he attacks for towing the government line.

Much more conventional is Ritchie Ovendale's *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century*. No doubt Mark Curtis would censure Ovendale for pandering to traditional images of Britain and America in the world without questioning the basic tenets of their foreign policy. Ovendale has also placed limits on himself by taking us through the history of the two countries in just over 160 pages. This means that exploration of some areas are frustratingly brief. Skybolt and Nassau, for example, are dealt with in two paragraphs. Yet his analysis is consistently thorough and cogent.

Moreover, in contrast to Curtis, much of this analysis is based on original documents, as well as a thorough critique of the historiography of the relationship. This leads to some crucial reinterpretations, perhaps the most important of which concerns the Second World War. Ovendale plays down the connection between Churchill and Roosevelt by the time of the Tehran conference at the end of 1943, when the British Prime Minister was stressing his fears of Soviet expansion in Eastern Europe. It was necessary for Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin to re-invoke the special relationship during 1946, although this was tempered by the limits placed on nuclear co-operation by the US and Britain's dire economic position. He also stresses the theory of Britain as the original "Cold War warrior," educating the Americans to the Soviet threat (p.160).

What Professor Ovendale successfully does with brevity but clarity is trace the ideological origins of Anglo-American ties from independence through to modern times without losing sight of the difficulties inherent in such an association. In complete contrast to the work of Mark Curtis, he is keen to stress points of Anglo-American tension and differences between successive governments on both sides of the Atlantic as to how they viewed the importance of the special relationship in their foreign policy. In Ovendale's eyes, the Suez crisis is viewed within the context of Eisenhower's

decision to demote the special relationship and make the UK "one among a number of allies" (p.100). This was followed by new Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's attempt to reinvigorate his relations with Eisenhower in 1957 (p.120), in much the same way that Bevin had done over a decade earlier.

Perhaps the scope of Ovendale's research is still a little too narrow. Most documentary evidence is from British and Australian, rather than US archives, but it does not seem to limit his thesis. Some, of course would contend with many of the points he makes: he generously asserts, for example, that Mrs Thatcher, like Bevin, was "in reality pragmatic and open to persuasion" (p.146). There is also a tendency for him to concentrate almost exclusively on political leaders and their cabinets, which means his study is far less wide-ranging than Curtis', although it is far more credible.

His brief conclusion is masterful, however, in that it continues to provide a synthesis of material produced on the subject up to this point, while simultaneously emphasising the need for historical revisionism and drawing his own conclusions. Ovendale is also content not to judge the actions of the two powers in the strict moral terms espoused by Curtis. Curtis sees Anglo-American hegemony both during the Cold War and beyond as a licence to exploit developing nations, while Ovendale explores both the strength and weaknesses of such a close relationship. The irony is that their vastly different standpoints both emphasise the strength of the relationship between Britain and America in global terms during the Twentieth Century.

Review reprinted courtesy of *Retrospect: Journal of the Birmingham Historical Association*