THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP:
WHAT DOES AMERICA TEACH US ABOUT OURSELVES?
By Janet Beer and Jon Snow

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PROFESSOR JANET BEER has been Vice Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University since 2007. She is a graduate of Reading and Warwick Universities and, as a postgraduate student, held a fellowship at Yale University. She worked for the Inner London Education Authority between 1983 and 1989 and has fulfilled academic and leadership roles at Warwick, Roehampton and Manchester Metropolitan universities.

Professor Beer has an established record of research in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American literature and culture and contemporary Canadian women’s writing. She has published widely in these fields and is currently completing a study of the late writing of Edith Wharton.

Professor Beer has a significant national profile and is the current chair of the national steering group for the National Student Survey (HEFCE). She sits on the Advisory Board of the Higher Education Policy Institute, is a Board member of the Equality Challenge Unit, a board member of UUK, a member of the Financial Sustainability Strategy Group (HEFCE), a member of the Advisory Group: Matched funding scheme for voluntary giving (HEFCE), a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of American Studies and, in August 2009, became the Chair of the University Alliance.

JON SNOW has been the face of Channel 4 News since 1989 when he became the main presenter. He has anchored the programme from wherever major world events occur: from Hong Kong at the time of the handover to China; from Washington during the Clinton impeachment hearings; from Stormont during the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement; and most recently from the West Bank, India, Iran and, at irregular intervals, from Iraq. His range of international interviewees extends from Nelson Mandela to Arundhati Roy to Tony Blair.

Jon Snow is not just a news presenter – he often does his own reporting on the major stories of the day, drawing on his years of experience as ITN’s diplomatic editor and Washington correspondent. In 2005 he was awarded the Richard Dimbleby BAFTA award for Best Factual Contribution to Television. In February 2006 he was named Journalist of the Year at the Royal Television Society Awards for his reports from New Orleans, Pakistan and from Africa. He also picked up the Home News award along with Gary Gibbon for the Attorney-General Leak.
INTRODUCTION

Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Philip Davies and I’m Director of the Eccles Centre for American Studies at the British Library, the sponsor of this event. I’m very pleased to welcome you to the sixth annual Eccles Centre Plenary Lecture at a BAAS conference. The Centre is honoured to co-operate with BAAS to showcase UK speakers on American Studies. This Lecture is part of the Centre’s portfolio of activities which includes events at the British Library and across the UK. The Centre also supports American Studies Fellowships and postgraduate awards that facilitate study at the British Library, and in the past three years the Centre has awarded more than £50,000 in this way. The British Library is the largest repository of North American materials outside of the United States and it was recently voted ‘best research library in the world’ by the American Association of Research Librarians.

I am very pleased this year to welcome Janet Beer, who is a former member of the BAAS Executive. She was the Association’s Treasurer for many years and was central to the recent restructuring of BAAS. As well as her sterling work for BAAS, Janet has done a few other things as well! She is currently Vice-Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University, having taken up this post in 2007. She has been a special advisor to the House of Commons Select Committee on Higher Education and Skills and is a member of several other influential bodies concerned with higher education in the UK. Many of us here have come across Janet through her research in nineteenth and twentieth century American and Canadian literature. She has written books on Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin and is currently working on further publications in this field. I think it is remarkable that anyone who is a Vice-Chancellor has time to work on any publications whatsoever and I’m delighted that one who does so is an American Studies specialist!

It is through the offices of Janet Beer that we have with us Jon Snow, who has acted as Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University, but who will be known to most of us through his journalism and his many award-winning programmes. He was the ITN Washington correspondent in the mid-1980s, and he is now approaching his twentieth anniversary as the main presenter of Channel 4 News, for which he has several times been named ‘News Presenter of the Year’. In addition to this, Jon is also a Trustee of the National Gallery,
President of the Bhopal Medical Appeal, Patron of Prisoners Abroad UK, and President of CTC – the UK’s national cyclists’ association.

So I will now hand over to Janet Beer and Jon Snow, who will discuss ‘The Special Relationship: What Does America Teach Us About Ourselves?’
JANET BEER
Well, I’m very pleased that Phil said that he can’t imagine how I can have the time to still engage in scholarly activity, so I’ll expect a certain amount of latitude from my very expert audience this afternoon!

Today, Jon and I would like to talk about the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom in the late 19th/early 20th centuries and in the late 20th/early 21st centuries. I’ll be considering the early period, and I’ll base my part of the talk around some ideas which can be broadly characterised as a consideration of the aspirational nature of the special relationship – which may hide a darker side of mutual suspicion – which I’ll then illustrate fairly randomly with both British and American authors. Among others, I want to juxtapose a couple of very unlikely bedfellows in terms of their pronouncements upon the other culture – Arthur Conan Doyle and Anita Loos. In other words, Sherlock Holmes and Lorelei Lee!

But first I just want to show you something I took off YouTube. I plagiarised it from a film called Shift Happens…
So, all our reactions to the slides sum up nicely the transfer of power that took place between the UK and the US. That transfer happened, and happened within minutes of the twentieth century.

Gertrude Stein theorised that America quickly became – because it entered the twentieth century first – the oldest country in the world, and its problems were problems of senility, not of youth. And whether you buy that particular formulation or not, it is true that the shift that is configured on YouTube, refuting our contemporary expectation of which nation is being described, actually happened very quickly. And perceptions changed – and, not least, perceptions of the other nation changed – on both sides, moving further apart.

In 1892, Conan Doyle has Sherlock Holmes give voice to the following sentiment: ‘It is always a joy to meet an American, Mr Moulton, for I am one of those that believe that the folly of a monarch and the blundering of a minister in far-gone years will not prevent our children from being some day citizens of the same world-wide country, under a flag which shall be a quartering of the Union Jack with the Stars and Stripes.’

But over the early years of the twentieth century this feeling became less mutual – with the Anglo Saxon concept of nation and culture being questioned as cultural pluralism became a more dominant, even if not universal, strain in the United States. The espousal of the notion of racial affiliation between the Anglo Saxon peoples was still expressed by those in power, such as the President who inscribed his book *America and the World War* in 1915 to a fellow author with the dedication: ‘To Edith Wharton from an American American, Theodore Roosevelt.’ Or by another President, Coolidge, in 1923 in his call to Congress: ‘America must be kept American.’ But this notion of the unity of the two nations can be said in general terms to subside as the balance of power shifted westward.

Significantly, turn-of-the-century calls for a more formal Anglo-American alliance seem to be loudest on the European side of the Atlantic. Joseph Chamberlain, who in a speech in May 1898 in Birmingham called for an alliance between the US and the UK, had recently married, at the age of 51, a 23–year old American called Mary Endicott. Now Joseph Chamberlain seems to have missed the point of such marriages: he was wealthy; his home, Highbury Hall, did not need restoration; and neither did the family fortunes
need to be revived! However, he did get a well-educated, politically-savvy and astute step-mother for his six children.

In the closing years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries travel between continents had been much more common, as had a very particular form of emigration to the UK, as one of America’s chief exports to the UK became its young women. Marriages between American women and British men grew exponentially in number, especially in the peerage. According to Kathleen Burk, by 1915 sixty peers and forty younger sons of peers had married wealthy American brides and in total 454 American heiresses had married into British families.

There were also, of course, more politically-freighted signs of change in the relationship between the two nations, and in the balance of power and influence, which I won’t elaborate on, but here they are as a sample, as enumerated by Brook Miller: Britain’s growing diplomatic isolation; the difficulties around the Irish question; border disputes in Latin America; the balance of debt; American refusal to adopt the gold standard or to comply with international copyright standards; and, of course, the shift in industrial and imperial muscle from the UK to the US.

Jon will talk more about the inequalities of the special relationship, that which the journalist Ben Wright sums up as ‘an unequal partnership, dogged with infidelity and unbalanced in its power’. And it was of course recently problematized still further by the significance in the UK, and the lack of significance in the US, of the displacement of the Epstein bust of Winston Churchill, the originator of the phrase ‘the special relationship’, by that of Abraham Lincoln in the Obama Oval Office.

I’m going to float in a fairly superficial way – because I am the literature person and Jon is the serious commentator (!) – various themes which he’ll then pick up. But we have in common an approach that says that we learn about ourselves from being in a relationship with the United States. And the relationship we’ll be describing was subject to fundamental change over the course of the twentieth century before and after Winston Churchill made his speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in 1946, declaring: ‘Neither the sure prevention of war nor the continuous rise of world organization will be gained 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 of America.’

Winston Churchill was, of course, the child of an American-British alliance. His mother, Jenny Jerome, was one of three daughters excluded from knickerbocker society in New York and brought to Europe by an ambitious mother. She was reputedly the bride upon whom Wharton based the character Lizzy Elmsworth in her posthumously published novel *The Buccaneers*. This novel is set in the 1870s and describes the beginning of the fifty year conquest of the British aristocracy by those whom Oscar Wilde described in an essay in 1887, ‘The American Invasion’:

> On the whole, the American invasion has done English society a great deal of good. American women are bright, clever, and wonderfully cosmopolitan… They insist on being paid compliments and have almost succeeded in making Englishmen eloquent. For our aristocracy they have an ardent admiration; they adore titles and are a permanent blow to republican principles… As for their voices, they soon get them into tune… She can talk brilliantly upon any subject, provided that she knows nothing about it. Her sense of humour keeps her from the tragedy of a grande passion, and, as there is neither romance nor humility in her love, she makes an excellent wife.

Jenny Jerome, however, was not at first deemed good enough for the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, even for their second son, Lord Randolph, for whom an injection of Yankee cash would have been particularly desirable as he was far from cheap to keep. However, Jenny had an important and influential champion – the Prince of Wales – who insisted that the marriage should be allowed to take place, which it did in April 1874. Winston was born eight month later.

Lorelei Lee, in Anita Loos’s brilliant 1925 novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, meets a Prince of Wales who is also very impressive: ‘The Prince of Wales is really wonderful. I mean even if he was not a prince he would be wonderful, because even if he was not a prince, he would be able to make his living playing the ukelele, if he had a little more practice.’

The Prince of Wales who assisted the Jerome-Marlborough marriage liked the wealth and style injected into the British aristocracy by the influx of American
brides, although he grew tired of it in his later years. But at the time Jenny
Jerome entered London society more fun was to be had in a trans-Atlantically
inflected milieu, as his ukelele-playing descendent discovered. This later
Edward, he of the ukelele, had the courage of his convictions, however, giving
up his throne for the sake of an American bride – one Mrs Wallace Simpson.

Whilst disquiet was expressed in the US about the loss of the marriagable girls
and their wealth – seen to be spent on shoring up European decadence and
decay – in Britain, reactions were charted by the disappointed mothers of those
subsequently described by Lorelei: ‘I mean, some of the girls in London seem
to be ladies, which seems to be the opposite of a lord. And some who are not
ladies are honourable. But quite a few are not ladies or honourable, either.’ Or
by the Marchioness of Brightlingsea in a telegram to a former family governess,
making an enquiry about the American heiress her younger son is about to marry
in the Wharton novel The Buccaneers: ‘Is she black? His anguished mother Selina
Brightlingsea’ a monumental misunderstanding of the composition of American
polite society at the turn of the century, which is subsequently deduced by the
governess to be attributable to Lady Brightlingsea’s geographical knowledge
being based upon a tapestry hanging in the Van Dyke salon of their stately home
communicating the conquest of the new world through the offering of gifts by
dusky maidens!

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s attitude to the United States, and you’ve already
heard the sentiments he gives to Holmes about re-unification, is expressed
here on a trip to the United States in 1894 and cited in the Cincinnati
Commercial Gazette:

I believe that the English-speaking races must either coalesce,
in which case the future of the world is theirs, or else they will
eternally neutralise each other and be overshadowed by some
more compact people, as the Russians or the Chinese. They
should pool their fleets and their interests. What a lot of minor
questions would be settled instantly, by their doing so! It would
be the first great step toward the abolition of war and the
federation of mankind.

And this is of interest for a number of reasons. It is, of course, entirely likely
that the slides I opened with may be more applicable to China, and that
that change will have happened over a period much shorter than that which
registered the move of empire from the UK to the US. But Doyle’s language in speaking of nations is too freighted here to be glossed over. ‘The English-speaking races’ are, for him, nothing less than co-terminus with mankind. ‘The future’, also, belongs to those united by the English language, as does the power to decide the abolition of war.

In Doyle’s fiction, however, and in particular in the Sherlock Holmes stories, there is a stark dissonance between the yearnings for the unity that he expressed in Cincinnati and in many other locations, and the way in which America is used often as a sinister and threatening back-story to a mystery. I’ll mention just two of his narratives, which have in common the evil and destructive influence of secret associations.

In the 1887 novel *A Study in Scarlet*, the unmitigated villains of the piece are the Mormons of Utah. As he says, ‘Not the Inquisition of Seville, nor the German Vehmgericht, nor the Secret Societies of Italy, were ever able to put a more formidable machinery in motion than that which cast a cloud over the State of Utah.’ The plot hinges on the refusal of John Ferrier to allow his adopted daughter to become a ‘heffer’ – one of many wives – a refusal which leads to forced marriage, rape, murder and mayhem. The elders of the Mormon Church (and Brigham Young is actually named in the narrative), do more than endorse violent crime: they perpetrate it. Doyle refers to the Danite Band – a group of avenging angels founded in the 1830s to cure dissent from Mormonism by violent means – going beyond their brief to kidnap and coerce into marriage women from the new western settlements. For as Doyle explains: ‘The supply of adult women was running short and polygamy, without a female population on which to draw was a barren doctrine indeed.’ On his spiritualist crusade in the United States in 1923, which took him to Utah, Doyle insisted that, ‘All I said about the Danite Band and the murders is historical, so I cannot withdraw that, though it is highly likely that in a work of fiction it is stated more luridly than in a work of history.’

Also lurid is his account of organised crime in the novel of 1915, *The Valley of Fear*. Again the fate of a young, innocent woman, endangered by being positioned between two competing lovers, is bound up with the rules and rituals of a secret society, in this case an evil variation on the organisational principles of freemasonry. In this instance, however, the woman and her true
lover escape the clutches of the gang at first, only for the woman to die of
disease and the man to die much later at the hands of the vengeful members
of Lodge 341 when they complete the prison sentence that he secured for
them. The plot is structured around the infiltration of the lodge – whose
activities, like the Danite Band, are violent and outside of the law – by a
Pinkerton detective who must then assume a new identity and keep forever
on the move. The world of organised crime is truly global, however, and
Edwards, the detective, can find no hiding place anywhere in the United
States, or England, or en route to South Africa where he is eventually
murdered.

Similarly, the KKK is configured as an organisation with a sinister, worldwide
reach in the short story *The Five Orange Pips*. And Chicago organised crime
demonstrates a tireless commitment to transatlantic revenge in *The Adventure
of the Dancing Men*. Doyle’s American villains are white men, operating in
the world of men, and their creed is to exact bloody and terrible retribution.
If Doyle contended that his Mormon villains had historical credibility, so too
did the lodge members in *The Valley of Fear*, being in all likelihood based on
the Molly Maguires, a secret society with Irish origins which operated in the
Pennsylvania anthracite region and which was broken by Pinkertons between
1876-77.

Doyle’s loading of the prior narrative – that which explains the events
pre-existent to and determining of the present-day mystery – with American
malignity, does seem to be at odds with all his public utterances about the
desirability of Anglo-American unity. But what these prior narratives illustrate,
perhaps, is the concern that Doyle would not have voiced openly, but which
was being expressed in the later years of the nineteenth century – that
the sense of a shared culture between the two countries was being driven
by materialism.

And this brings us neatly back to Lorelei, still on tour in London, where her view
of the English-speaking peoples standing united is not quite so optimistic:

And Dorothy says that when we get to London nearly
everybody speaks English, anyway. So, Dorothy and I came
to the Ritz and it is delightfully full of Americans. I mean you
would really think it was New York because I always think the most delightful thing about traveling is to be always running into Americans and to always feel at home.

Not content with London and the opportunities it affords to buy flowers made of seashells by impoverished aristocratic ladies, Lorelei heads off to the continent where Loos exposes her, making none too subtle a pun: ‘To Kunst’ or art in ‘the central of Europe’. Although Dorothy says at one point, I think, that what Germans are full of is not Kunst but delicatessen…

In the Introduction to Gentleman Prefer Blondes – called ‘the great American novel’ by Edith Wharton and ‘the best book of philosophy written by an American’ by George Santayana – Loos expresses the ambition that Lorelei was to be a symbol of ‘the lowest possible mentality of our nation’. In so doing, she put her finger on an issue about national identity as it is figured through encounters with other cultures. How Europe or America are viewed expresses the individual or the society’s level of self or national awareness. Conan Doyle’s public utterances were in the rhetoric of unity. But the pre-histories in his fiction give voice to a deeper suspicion of the secret, the violent, and the often vengeful.

So, in an attempt to lock together the issues I’ve been skirting, I’d just like to re-cap before Jon takes over. There are narratives competing for attention in the early twentieth century – being not universally espoused or rejected, but speaking of a complexity about cultural interactions which are less and less comparativist and more and more antagonistic. One of my themes – Anglo-American marriages – is spoken of in very different terms to those used by Oscar Wilde by the British gothicist H.B. Marriott Watson in 1903 when he asserts that, ‘The American woman has undertaken to annex as much of Europe as is practicable. She is anarchical.’ Perhaps this shift in tone about the American woman speaks of a wider shift in transatlantic attitudes, as Americanization becomes a euphemism for the growth of a commodity capitalism which did not sit easily in an English setting. There is a growth in the language of mutual suspicion, where even activities which once spoke of reciprocal affirmation now point to differences of historiography and genealogy, and of quantity over quality – the last word upon which I will give to Oscar Wilde, in a piece of dialogue from A Woman of No Importance:
Hester: We have the largest country in the world, Lady Caroline. They used to tell us at school that some of our states are as big as France and England put together.

Lady Caroline: Ah! you must find it very draughty, I should fancy.

JON SNOW
Because I have no overheads, and I have no chance of upstaging Janet's content, I'm going to take centre stage!

Well, it's a daunting prospect to follow Janet – to follow her scholarship, sensitivity and erudition. That was a beautiful piece. What a clever thing to extract Conan Doyle and Anita Loos and build her thesis around it. And I'm bound to accept it. And, in fact, I feared she would leave the special relationship in better shape than she did. Because I think, in truth, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the special relationship – in political and practical terms – has gone pretty headlong the way it's gone in many of the descriptions that she produces from literature.

My offering to you – and I am not an academic, I have never been, and never could be – and to venture onto the turf of the specialism of so august a collection of academics is a highly dangerous enterprise. To engage with one academic is dangerous; to engage with many is simply foolish! However, my offering is rooted in my own experience, my own naiveté, and my own enthusiasm. My argument rests on the belief that the current special relationship is really centred on a romanticised view of history, consolidated by the pressure of war, and finally wrapped in mythology. Mythology beautifully made manifest, exactly as Janet mentioned, by the bust of Winston Churchill that stood with pride in George Bush Jr.'s Oval Office.

I just want to take a slightly closer look at this bust. Of course, if I had been more efficient I would have had powerpoint slides so that I could show it to you! However, this bust is a priceless artefact. It is by Jacob Epstein. It belongs to us – i.e. it is housed in the government’s collection. And, of course, it immortalised Britain’s greatest wartime leader – as Janet mentioned, a British
leader with an American mother. And yet who in the twenty-first century would view Churchill, now, as representing modern Britain, or even a modern British hankering after a special relationship with America? Would you great specialists want a bust of Churchill in your study? Well, maybe, if it was by Epstein, for purely financial and monetary reasons at this time of credit crunch! But I suspect, beyond the aesthetic, there wouldn’t be any philosophical reason for having him there.

What does Churchill represent to us? I’ll argue that he represents, in terms of the special relationship, an aberrant yet absolutely glorious moment in our history – and a life-saving moment; but not that he is the touchstone of any special relationship.

Indeed, poor Obama! What could be worse that pitching up in the Oval Office only to find Winston Churchill, the man who in his second premiership suppressed the Kenyan Mau Mau, among whose followers, allegedly tortured under the colonial regime in Kenya, was one Hussein Onyango Obama: President Obama’s own grandfather. And what a glorious thing, to find you are sitting at your desk, you look up, and there is your grandfather’s torturer.

So how on earth did such a totem end up in the Oval Office? Well, as many of you probably know, after 9/11 Tony Blair blagged it from the British government collection and heaved it over to Washington to symbolise our special transatlantic friendship in America’s wartime hour of need. We shall indeed fight them on the beaches. And so we did, with most disastrous consequences.

Blair, in resorting to our greatest wartime leader, imbued the simple-minded Bush with the view that this was now his wartime hour. Bush/Blair preferred to conjure history; to regard 9/11 as an act of war, rather than the diabolical criminal act of mass murder that it actually was. The very conjuring of Churchill consolidated the helter-skelter of madness that led us into Afghanistan, Iraq, the deaths of hundreds of thousands, the displacement of millions, and our active complicity in torture and Guantanamo. This was no act of special relations. This was a denial of the freedoms and liberties that the very birth of America awoke in all of us. No two leaders have done more to reject the values and the constitutional rights enshrined in the best of both Britain and America than the two men who gazed upon Churchill’s newly imported bronze countenance in the Oval Office in the aftermath of 9/11.
It is my contention that whatever the cultural and literary relationship etched by Janet – and it was a beautiful etching – the special political relationship now effectively no longer exists. That, indeed, in the last fifty years it has been asserted, resurrected, traded upon, but at its heart it has not existed – as a consistent, reliable fact – since 1945. That great reliable fact – that America eventually entered the war and saved all our lives – that is, I believe, one great moment that a great country rose to but was not part of a continuum of a special relationship.

I should admit that my own relationship with America started extremely late. Its very lateness intensified its passion and its complexity. I was in my early 30s before I even set foot in the country. I was of an age when everybody either went to America or went to India, and I went to India. We drove overland, we wore beads and open-toed sandals, and we did our full-share of hating America. My initial experience of America was ‘America abroad’: most particularly, America in Iran, Iraq, and Central and Latin America.

Let me just look back at Iran for a moment, because I think that it kind of distinguishes – and I don’t supposed you thought you for a moment that you were going to come here to discuss the special relationship by looking at Iran(!) – and, yet, Iran sums up very, very beautifully the nature of the special relationship. Because here is a country in which Britain historically is most expert. It has a great feast of people that speak Farsi. It has a wonderful cast of historians. You only have to go to the British Museum to see some of the greatest Iranian artefacts. We have raided Persepolis better than anyone else on Earth. And, amazingly, whatever the politics, as anyone who has been to the British Museum of late will know, there has been a cascade of the most spellbinding exhibitions on Iranian artefacts, Persian artefacts, that have somehow made their way here. They have never been out of the country before and they have come here! Despite all the verbal hatred, rhetoric, nuclear bombs and all the rest of it, there they are!

So here you have Britain, the old colonial power, the oddball outfit that had this strange sense of its own relationship with America, having, in Iran, an extraordinary historical expertise; although of course we did our own fair share of mucking up in there too! But, nevertheless, we somehow kept the aspidistra flying and still do now. We still have the biggest embassy in Iran. We still get hated more than anyone else, because the Americans aren’t there to do the job for us!
I was in Iran at the time at which the Revolution occurred. I was there in 1979 and it was an extraordinary event, because, of course, it gave rise eventually to the capture of the American embassy and the holding hostage for 444 days of more than fifty American diplomats. It was one of America’s darkest hours since the end of the Vietnam War. And, indeed, it is still now a gaping wound which only Obama has moved to try and start to sew up. To be there was extraordinary. But because there were no British hostages, my editor telexed me to tell me to come home. Fortunately, just as I got that telex, all American correspondents were deported and I was one of the last people left there speaking English – well, a kind of English. And I was contacted by ABC, the American television network, to ask whether I would agree to be seconded to them, because although I didn’t speak satisfactory English, I spoke intelligible-enough English to perhaps be of use to them! They, in any case, had given birth to a new programme, which was going to go out every night at 11 o’clock, called ‘Iran in Crisis: America held Hostage’, and I became their correspondent for much of the duration of the hostage crisis. And in that capacity I was caught in the great maelstrom of misunderstanding that it is possible to enjoy with the United States. We are old hands at this misunderstanding, of course, but it was glorious to behold it in a third-party country – looking out to America and hearing New York in my ear, saying to me: ‘Mr Snow we don’t like that script. You can’t use words like “queue”. You gotta use “line”’. So, I’d reply, ‘Oh, that’s fine. I’ll do that!’ So, I could see our own literary disjunction in play.

What I wasn’t prepared for, however, was the fact that I would ring them and tell them that things were going on and they would then tell me that they weren’t going on, because the State Department had given them an altogether different view of what was going on. And so I’d say, ‘Well, the State Department isn’t here, and I am, and I can tell you that what I have told you is true and what they’re telling you is rubbish.’ And they would reply, ‘Don’t worry, Jon. We’ll sort it out in your script…’

And then one night I got a call saying, ‘John, Cy Vance…’ – who was Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State to you and me – had agreed to debate live with the Iranian foreign minister, Mr Sadegh Ghotbzadeh. And they asked me if I thought I could get him. And I thought, ‘Do I think I can get him?’ I mean, the fact is I could get him like just like that, but I’m going to tell them that it’s very difficult because I want a better fee this time! So, I went round to Mr Ghotbzadeh’s office, and knocked on the door, and said, ‘Sadegh!’ And he said, ‘Who is it?’ And I said,
‘It’s me, Jon Snow.’ ‘Oh, yeah. Come on in’. And then he asked what I wanted and I said, ‘Look, I’m afraid it’s going to involve getting up at four in the morning, but Cyrus Vance…’ ‘What! Cyrus Vance wants to talk to me? Fantastic! Let’s do it!’ So, that was all fine. I fixed it all up.

But there is a much more serious tale to this than that. At that stage it was still possible for me, as a British journalist, to wander into the Embassy and talk to the hostages. It was still possible to talk to the students who were holding them. And no one was more surprised to still be holding them than the students. And you can see here building this extraordinary disjuncture; this complete failure. The British were on the line all the time to Washington saying, ‘You know, if you send somebody…If you send Vance, if you send Carter, even. Send anybody. Come in, engage with these people on a level, and you’ll be able to sort everything out. But if you don’t talk to them, they are going to get more and more dog in the manger…’

And you see this played out again and again in crises across the world, most recently, obviously, with the nuclear crisis in Tehran. Good old Iran. Still, playing the same old game, you know. They are very sophisticated at winding up the United States. And then we are very silly, because although we think we have huge influence with the United States, they don’t listen to us.

And so we see played out perfectly in the Iranian issue the one absolutely vital nature of the special relationship which we need to understand: that when America runs into somebody who thinks they know more about the issue than they do, they don’t listen. Except, and here I’ll give you one little tip that I picked up yesterday, Hillary Clinton, when she came over here for the G20, went into the Foreign Office and sat down with Britain’s Iranian experts and Britain’s Pakistan experts for ninety minutes at a time: two sets of ninety minute sessions. And our guys had been flown in from Pakistan, from Afghanistan – the Ambassadors and all the rest of it – and she just sat and listened and nobody, my informant in the Foreign Office told me, could remember a time when this had ever happened before. And they got a real sense that they went away very much enthused by the take that they had heard on what to do about Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

I digressed because I think we need to understand that there is nothing special about the inadequacy of our relationship with the United States. There is nothing special about our lingual difficulties. And there is nothing special about our
diplomatic difficulties. They are universal. And they are unique to this young and absolutely, unbelievably wonderful and yet troubled nation, the United States.

My second observation of America abroad is from Central America. I was sent, when I was a cub reporter, to El Salvador. I didn’t know whether it had a Pacific or an Atlantic coastline. I had no idea where it was. But I was going because a rare thing had happened: an Archbishop, Óscar Romero, had been shot dead during Mass. And the shocking thing one discovered – because, of course, Britain never had any interest, journalistically anyway, in Central and Latin America – was that here was an arena in which the gringo was God. In which America ruled the roost and Britain absolutely counted for nothing. It is absolutely amazing to be in a continent, to go through country after country, and find that we don’t matter! The Foreign Office has closed the Managua and San Salvador embassies. We don’t have any representation there at all, and nor did we then. We have consuls; extraordinary businessmen, and all the rest of it. But there we are. There are the Americans and the gringo is absolutely never English.

The only Brit I ever met in Central and Latin America with any regularity was Graham Greene. Not, of course, in person, you understand! And Graham Greene spoke to me of the most fantastic truths in El Salvador: the tolling bell; the black-clad priest; the coffins; the grief; the love; the purple shadows on white stucco-plaster churches. There is an absolute, beautiful romance. And then there is this terrible dark scar which extends from the multinational fruit companies, all the way through the drug trade, and right on into the armed forces which until the war on Iraq was a terrible blight on so much of Central and Latin America and which resulted in CIA coups, and the deposing of people who were not acceptable to the Administration in Washington. A cascade, in the last sixty years, if you take the changes in governance and the rest of it. And, of course, if there had not been a war in Iraq, I think it is fair to say that Chavez would have been deposed from Venezuela. There was an attempt by the CIA but it was extremely cack-handed and it didn’t work.

So, it is when you are in Latin America that you realise that America is not obsessed with Britain because they have got their hands full down there! And there is Obama, even today, in Mexico. He’s down there trying to do a deal on small arms, trying to stop them going through. And you just get a completely
different picture. In practical terms, America simply hasn’t got time to look at Britain for very long. You know Obama didn’t have time to greet Brown for more than fifteen minutes when he went over there. And you all know what Obama had to go off to afterwards. He had to go and meet the Boy Scouts of America; that was his next meeting! He cut the meeting with Brown to an absolute minimum so that he could go and see the Boy Scouts of America! That was the level of the importance of that meeting at the time.

Of course, those of us who thought we had worked out that Obama was not in any way in thrall to Britain were breathing a sense of relief that this was the case – that he would deal with us as a normal collection of people – and we were very worried when he stood up with Brown and made his statement that, ‘The thing I love about Great Britain…’ And I thought, ‘Oh my God, we are going down that road again…’ And then he continued, ‘Is its people; its kinship.’ And I thought, ‘Well, there’s an anodyne statement.’ But everybody loved it, because he had said something about ‘Great Britain’, and he’d said something about ‘the people’. And I thought to myself in the news conference as he said it, and I was sitting ten feet away, ‘Oh God, is he going to go further?’ And yes! He did! The Queen came up! He professed a love for the Queen, and how good he felt about her, and how nicely she had handled it, and how she had let Michelle put her arm around her! And we all knew the special relationship would soon be regarded as being alive and kicking in the *Daily Mirror*!

But, in fact, Obama made no reference to that awful concept that has put us into so much trouble – this mythological ‘special relationship’. It got us into Iraq. And it has got us into Afghanistan. There are, obviously, all sorts of independent issues of national security which require the fact that we do these things at times. But history will judge that Iraq, in particular, was a terrible interpretation of our best interests. Harold Wilson, in the time of Lyndon Johnson, when asked to join the war in Vietnam, refused: and it had no consequences whatever. It didn’t have any military consequence because like in Iraq, America had more than enough troops to go round, (or not enough troops to go round). And, of course, when the Americans were tested in Suez, they also said this is absolutely not in our interest and we are certainly not coming to assist Britain in any way – indeed you should get out!
And then there was the very delicious balancing business of the war in the Falklands. Now, that was in a way the last time we begged on our knees for American help – and the Administration was split right down the middle. You had the real ideologues like Jean Kirkpatrick, who was the Ambassador to the United Nations, who was adamant that Argentina must be supported and that the British must not in any way receive any succour or assistance from the United States. And you had Caspar Weinberger, unsurprisingly, later, Sir Caspar Weinberger, the Secretary of Defense, saying, ‘No, this is in our best interest, we must support it.’ And, thanks to Sir Caspar, the group of people on the Falklands were liberated at a cost of whatever it was – around £2.5m per head, as opposed to the £50,000 it might have cost to resettle them in the Hebrides – and the missiles and fuel which made the difference between winning and losing were supplied by the United States.

So, I think you could point to 1982 as the last time that Britain begged and did just get. But since then, most of the asking has been from the other side and most of the giving has been from this. And if that is the kind of relationship that any of us regard as special – well, enjoy!

But, of course, that is not right! Let me end with what adorns Obama’s Oval Office: a bust, as Janet said, of Lincoln. And the book beside his bed? Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln by Doris Kearns Goodwin. It is a completely magical book. If you haven’t read it, I urge it upon you. You will get through it in three days, even though it is 800 pages – but you get through 800 pages in eight hours, anyway! I think it is one of the best books to be published in the twenty-first century, and when you read it you will have even greater hope in Obama! And even if we are all wrong and he turns out to be dreadful, the fact that he read this book will be a great plus! It is about a thoroughly American man of almost unimaginable greatness, who forged what we long for: he forged a team of government in war and bankruptcy, drawn from absolute political diversity and yet bound together for the good of all, united and uplifted by aspirations centred on shared integrity, peace, prosperity and equality: these glorious qualities for which all of us have a love for America, and are bound to America by.

There is very little to beat the American Constitution. Of course, we look at Florida and we say ‘What a pity’. But that was human failing. It was not a constitutional failing. It should never have gone to the Supreme Court and then we wouldn’t be in the trouble we are in. But there we are. It did.
Lincoln is free of any notions of a need for Old England; completely confident of a free-standing, free America. We should read him, learn from him, and break the mythic bonds for all our good! Thank you very much.
Questions and Answers

**Question:** I think one of the problems with the special relationship is that it is a phrase that happens to have been coined, and later monopolised, by politicians. I’ve always thought that there is another America besides this – that which George Bush presumed to speak for and that is represented by people like Woody Guthrie and anyone else who you can think of who comes from a cultural tradition where there is still a special relationship, whether it’s the musical connections between the old folk ballads, the ‘British invasion’, the invasion of America by blues players. I’m just thinking of it musically, and Janet was bringing up culture. So, I’m just wondering if there is hope? Because, obviously, you have such contempt for the phrase in political terms. But can we still talk about the special relationship in the kind of cultural terms that I think have invigorated both sides of the Atlantic?

**Jon Snow:** Well, I think it is much more comfortable in a globalised world. It’s just that it was all so uniquely British and American. And whilst there is a wonderful thread, you only have to think of the French and the Spanish, the Eastern Europeans and the Germans and the Jews and all these other people that have also made these incredible relationships. And I didn’t dare talk about the American relationship with Israel, incidentally, which is another special relationship which is entirely one way – it goes in but nothing comes back. And I agree absolutely with you that there are all these other wonderful ways in which we renew each other endlessly. You can obviously think of the Beatles in the 60s going that way, and, as you say, blues coming this way – and art too, Warhol and everything. Yes, sure, I don’t think there is any question about that. I obviously was being a bit naughty. I was just trying to sort of stir you up, really. I just thought that after the love-in with Janet we should have something hateful and poisonous from an ignorant hack!

**Janet Beer:** I can be hateful and poisonous, too! But what is interesting, though, about the cultural aspect, is how in fact if you look at the patrician voices – the Edith Whartons, and the Henry Jameses at the turn of the century – they are quite counter-cultural in terms of what is going on more generally. So that their notion of the special relationship – that Wharton and James would talk about, you know, life in New York or in Boston in 1880 – was like that of an English provincial cathedral town. But who was it like that for? Only a very, very tiny minority.
**Question:** I’ll give you a chance to be hateful! Your reading of Doyle – I mean, if you go through all of the villains in Doyle you’ll see that he is an equal opportunity hater! Almost every foreigner comes out looking rather bad. And the foreigners are all pretty equally useless in Doyle. So, is he making a special point about how awful the Americans are? Or about how awful foreigners are, and therefore how lucky we all are to be English? Isn’t that Doyle’s message?

**Janet Beer:** Well, what is striking, I think, talking about the Sherlock Holmes stories here is, yes, you are right, Johnny Foreigner isn’t an attractive proposition very often. And, there are a few Indian villains and the very odd Australian villain. However, there are no public utterances about us becoming one with India or Australia and there are many, many public utterances about the ‘special relationship’, particularly in the 1890s. And then, of course, when he went completely bonkers in terms of spiritualism, the main ‘special relationship’ had to be with the United States. So, the villainy was at odds with the public utterances about consanguinity, which is what it comes down to – nation, and race.

**Jon Snow:** And just on the political front, this business of being the 51st state threaded through into the 1950s and 60s in the great debates about Europe. But if anyone ever really now tested public opinion about whether they wanted to link up with America, even now with Obama in office, I don’t think there would be any great enthusiasm. And we are much more European than we ever were. You know, I got lost on the motorway coming here. Because of all the road works I missed the sign and so I drove up the slipway at the next turning and I stopped a man in a yellow jacket with a spade over his shoulder and said, ‘Which way Nottingham?’ And he replied, ‘Je ne sais pas, exactement...!’

**Philip Davies:** And on that wonderfully cosmopolitan note I want to thank you all for being here. I want to thank Janet Beer, who I invited to give this lecture and who jumped at the chance I am very pleased to say. And I want to thank Jon Snow, who Janet invited into it and who made such a brilliant hour for us all. Thank you very much.
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