

FIGHTING WITH ALLIES

Also by Robin Renwick

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

Fighting with Allies

America and Britain in Peace and War

Robin Renwick

palgrave
macmillan



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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1996 978-0-333-65743-0

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Published by PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-1-349-39743-3 ISBN 978-0-230-37982-4 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230379824

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Transferred to digital printing 2002

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Foreword

'We, my dear Crossman, are Greeks in the American Empire. You will find the Americans much as the Greeks found the Romans – great big, vulgar, bustling people, more vigorous than we are.' (Harold Macmillan, 1943)

We have only Richard Crossman's word for it that Macmillan said this and Crossman was never the most reliable of witnesses. But there were plenty of later occasions on which Macmillan talked in similar terms and this was among the British a near-conventional way of thinking at the time. To some, it still is. We find the same plaintive and patronising echo in a piece of doggerel inspired by the Anglo-American negotiations at the end of the Second World War which resulted in the setting up of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund:

In Washington Lord Halifax
Once whispered to J.M. Keynes,
It's true they have the money bags,
But we have all the brains.

In the same year, similar sentiments were expressed in more official language in a Foreign Office paper on relations with the United States: 'If we go about our business in the right way we can help to steer this great unwieldy barge, the United States of America, into the right harbour. If we don't, it is likely to continue to wallow in the ocean, an isolated menace to navigation.'¹

When Winston Churchill tried and failed, towards the end of the Second World War, to alert the United States to Stalin's plans for the subjugation of Eastern Europe, in exasperation he exclaimed to General Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff: 'There is only one thing worse than fighting with Allies, and that is fighting without them!' He firmly believed that the United States could be relied upon to do the right thing in the end, 'having first exhausted the available alternatives'.

The 'special relationship', real or supposed, which has existed between Britain and the United States since the Second World War has been the subject of much analysis and editorializing, often telling us more about the opinions of the author than the facts of the case.

This is not another attempt at interpretation. It is, rather, a narrative – an effort to describe what happened and why, and how it appeared at the time, and in retrospect, to the principal actors on both sides. Readers are left to draw their own conclusions about the character and quality of the relationship and its effectiveness in world affairs, though I have offered some observations along the way.

This account deals with the political relationship between governments – not

with the myriad ties of language, literature, family and history which, arguably, make up what is really 'special' about the relationship. It is based on the memoirs, letters and writings of those engaged at the time. When all the official records come to be published, I doubt if they will change the story much.

What follows is not based on my own experiences, but of course it is influenced by them. As Counsellor at the British Embassy in Washington in the 1980s, I was involved in the effort to secure American support for Britain during the Falklands War. As British Ambassador to the United States, I returned to Washington in the afterglow of Anglo-American military cooperation in the Gulf War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, however, the mood in America increasingly was one of preoccupation with domestic concerns, reflected in the 1992 presidential election.

In the ensuing period, the Bosnia crisis provoked sharp transatlantic differences and one of the most serious disagreements between the British and American governments since Suez. With a long and painful experience of wars in the Balkans, the Europeans embarked on an effort to limit and contain the conflict and provide humanitarian assistance. While many Americans were uninterested in Bosnia, to those who were the issue was seen primarily as one of resistance to Serb aggression without, however, a willingness to commit ground forces to that task. A wide gap developed between those, like Britain, with highly vulnerable forces on the ground and those who favoured stronger action against the Serbs. Both sides could advance powerful arguments for their point of view. The Europeans committed lightly armed ground forces to what became a peace-keeping effort in the absence of a peace to keep, while many in America attempted to engage in the impossible task of leading from behind.

As Ambassador in Washington, my most important task was to help contain and overcome these differences and to work to achieve the unity of purpose that eventually was displayed in the actions taken against the Bosnian Serbs and the negotiating effort made by the United States in the autumn of 1995.

As the following account will show, sharp disagreements have been a feature of Anglo-American relations on many occasions over the past fifty years. They have not undermined the relationship, the fundamentals of which – vast investments in each other's countries, the ties of family, history and language and the specially close nuclear, defence and intelligence relationship – remain.

It certainly is the case, however, that intra-Allied disagreements would not have been permitted to develop to the same degree in a world still dominated by a clear perception of the Soviet threat. The relaxation of East–West tension has encouraged Europeans to believe that they are now less dependent on the United States, and Americans to believe that the Europeans should do more to look after their own security. Yet one of the lessons of Bosnia has been the improbability of success in dealing with such crises unless the Europeans and the United States are able to unite on a strategy for doing so.

Much of the strength of the postwar Anglo-American relationship has derived from the ability to overcome important disagreements in the pursuit of wider

objectives and to weather successive changes of administration in Britain and the United States over the past fifty years. As I shall describe, the relationship has undergone profound changes, of which the most profound of all has been the increasing disparity of power.

It certainly can no longer be taken for granted. This work is published at a time when there has again been a whiff of the 1930s in the air. As recent events should have reminded us, Winston Churchill's words in August 1938 have no less relevance today:

How heavily do the destinies of this generation hang upon the government and people of the United States . . . Will the United States throw their weight into the scales of peace and law and freedom while time remains, or will they remain spectators until the disaster has occurred; and then, with infinite cost and labour, build up what need not have been cast down?

It is for the reader to judge what Anglo-American cooperation has achieved since the war and whether the world would have been poorer without it. It has recently been the subject of obituary notices in the British press – another near-constant feature of the relationship. Yet over the decades it has shown a Lazarus-like tendency to survive. The founding fathers did their work well in creating ties deep and strong enough to cope with the vagaries of governments on both sides of the Atlantic. For that reason, and because Britain will continue to have an essential role to play in helping to bind together the United States and Europe, I have no doubt that it will endure.

ROBIN RENWICK

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Roy Jenkins, Henry Kissinger, Nigel Lawson, David Owen, George Shultz and Margaret Thatcher for permission to use the quotations from them.

Invaluable source material is to be found in the Cabinet, Foreign Office and Prime Ministerial records in the Public Record Office, Kew, in the series Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) published by the State Department, in the US presidential libraries, and in the memoirs, diaries and correspondence of those principally involved in these events (see the References).

I owe a particular debt to the biographical works of Stephen Ambrose, Alan Bullock, Martin Gilbert, Kenneth Harris, Alistair Horne, Ben Pimlott, Robert Rhodes James, Andrew Roberts and Philip Ziegler and to Michael Charlton (*The Price of Victory*), Margaret Gowing (*Britain and Atomic Energy*), Max Hastings (*The Korean War*) and Keith Kyle (*Suez*).

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