

**Allies in War:
Britain and America against the Axis Powers, 1940-1945**
Roundtable Review



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Review by Kathleen Burk, University College London

The Anglo-American “special relationship”, whatever that might mean, is of current as well as of historic interest, at least in the U.K. Does it exist? If so, is it desirable? If it does exist, it has its origins in the Second World War. Amongst the non-cognoscenti, the Second World War is seen as an episode during which the two democracies stood together against murderous dictatorships, fighting for the right and for justice. This is not, of course, untrue, but it does not follow that the outcome of the war was the only issue between the two allies. Traditionally, the perceptions of the general public have been of unity; increasingly, the perceptions of historians have been of conflict. Look at it in a clear-eyed manner. What were the strengths of Great Britain which made her a desirable ally? The strength of sterling, a diplomatic service of rare quality, the Royal Navy, and the Empire. What did the US government try to do during the war? The US Treasury tried to destroy sterling so that it would not be a competitor with the dollar, and Roosevelt and many others wanted to strip Britain of her empire. (The war itself took care of a good part of the Royal Navy; the Diplomatic Service remained.) At the end of 1943, Roosevelt consciously humiliated Churchill in front of Stalin in order to publicise, and reinforce, the American decision that the U.K. was of little further use or importance to the U.S. At the end of the war with Germany, the U.S., with virtually no notice, ended Lend-Lease, and left their ally nearly bankrupt. And then, when she very reluctantly loaned Britain \$3.75 billion (Canada loaned her \$1.25 billion at the same time), she forced her to open her currency and her economy to the onslaught of the dollar and American business. Not surprisingly, many British were driven to conclude that, if this is an ally, who needs an enemy?

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But from the other direction: what did the U.S. see in front of her in the form of her ally? A country which, for the previous two centuries, had been the supreme global power and the

supreme financial power, an empire on which the sun never set - comprising 20% of the world's surface and 25% of the world's population - and whose currency, the pound, was the equivalent of gold. Wherever the U.S. turned, the U.K. was there before her. The U.S. was a regional hegemon, but the U.K. with her Empire was the only international power on the globe. If the U.S. was to expand economically, at the least the informal British Empire had to contract. In any case, the U.S. had not entered the war to save the British Empire, as she made clear time and again: it was part of the destiny of the U.S. to bring freedom to enslaved peoples around the globe, including those enslaved by their ally.

One of the strengths of this excellent book is that the author does not ignore the sometimes ferocious nature of the conflict between the two countries. Indeed, he reports one rather nice episode when the American Admiral King nearly leapt across the table to punch the British General Brooke, silently egged on by the American General Stilwell. This must not have happened often, or readers would have been regaled by the stories in dozens of memoirs. Nevertheless, it stands as a symbol both of the conflict and of the good sense and fundamental recognition by both sides of the need to stand together: King may have detested the British - and he did - but presumably he detested the Japanese even more. Nevertheless, the strategic conflicts, especially from 1943 on, were hugely threatening to the fabric of the alliance, and in these cases, Stoler highlights the importance of personalities in resolving or at least containing them. His heroes include General Dwight Eisenhower, General of the Armies, who had to control two towering egos, the British General Bernard Montgomery and the American General George Patton, and, in general, to ensure that all of the allied armies worked together; Field Marshall Sir John Dill, Head of the Joint Staff Mission in Washington, whose whole being was devoted to fostering a strong Anglo-American alliance; and General George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, whose close relationship with Dill meant that the alliance worked as smoothly as was humanly possible - at least until Dill's death in 1944. Marshall was also of historical importance because he proposed that whichever of the two had the larger force in the field in any of the theatres of war would provide the commander of all of the forces: the sheer common sense of the idea was striking, but the fact that both Roosevelt and Churchill accepted it was even more so. Stoler's treatment of the episode underlines its importance without hammering it at the reader.

It was need that kept the alliance together. The U.S. and the U.K. are, and always have been, commercial rivals. The fact that they share democratic values and more-or-less liberal political systems, and the English language, did not make them allies; rather they facilitated the military alliance during both World Wars (and the Cold War). What kept them together during the Second World War was not warm fellowship, but sheer unbridled need. Great Britain was forced into both wars from the beginning; it took years, in both cases, for the US to become a belligerent, having to be torpedoed into the First and torpedoed and bombed into the Second. In essence, the two countries were brought together three times during the last century by a common enemy: the warm fellowship was the icing on the cake.

A primary quality of this book is the quiet confidence of Stoler as he presents to the reader a book of clarity and lucidity. The battles are easy and enjoyable to follow, not least because of the clarity of the maps. Indeed, consulting a map became such a reflex that the lack of one for the Eastern front came as something of a shock. The footnotes are spare but sufficient, but even without knowing the author's publication record, it should be clear to anyone reading the book that it rests on a huge effort of research. A person of less resource would be fearful of leaving anything out lest it should prove important. It is not that the argument is not complicated, but that it has been pared to its essentials. This means that the specialist can enjoy it, because s/he can supply the supporting tendrils; the non-specialist can also enjoy it, because it appears to be close to the reader's Holy Grail: the short book which will tell you all you really need to know about a subject; and the student will enjoy it because it is short enough to read in a week.

And his overall conclusion? Although the relationship was not, and could never have been, "special" in the cloying Churchillian sense, with its hymns to hands-across-the-sea, the fact that it survived the repeated threats to rend it asunder during the war underlines that, in some sense, it was. Indeed, he ends the book with his own paean: "Never before had two nations fused their military high commands and forces to such an extent and so successfully, or so collaborated in economic mobilization, the sharing of intelligence secrets, and the establishment of so many combined boards and committees to coordinate multiple aspects of their combined war effort. Nor had two heads of government ever before created such an extensive correspondence and strong personal friendship, a friendship duplicated by many of their subordinates and citizens. In those and numerous other ways the Anglo-American wartime relationship was "special" compared to any other alliance in history." (230) It was fit for purpose, as is this book.

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