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'Special relationship' is no great love affair REALPOLITIK: BRITAIN

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BRITAIN'S special relationship with the US is one of the oddities of the world of diplomacy. It's not a treaty and it's never been encapsulated by any formal agreement but, for good or ill, it does exist. Without it Britain would never have become involved in the US- led invasion of Iraq which toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003.

A reading of Britain's colonial history of the 1920s would have told Tony Blair that interfering in Iraq was not a good idea but, willy-nilly, the British prime minister decided that supporting the special relationship was better than standing on the sidelines.

Fair enough. Britain and the US stood shoulder-to-shoulder during the two global conflicts of the 20th century and there has always been an understanding that the cousins are more likely to support one another than to fall out.

Even though a large proportion of the UK population was distinctly unhappy about seeing British forces committed to a possibly illegal conflict in Iraq, the fallback position was that at least Britain's voice would be given a hearing in Washington. That was the theory, but if we are to believe Kendall Myers, a highly respected State Department analyst, the special relationship is really nothing of the kind.

Far from being an exclusive bond, it is a "myth" and instead of being able to exert his influence in Washington, Blair has received "nothing, no payback" for supporting the Bush administration in its reckless policy of invading Iraq.

Myers made his comments in private and may now be forced to take early retirement for daring to express a commonly held belief, but at least he has pushed the question of the transatlantic connection into the public domain.

Blair makes much of the special relationship, because it validates his own reasons for invading Iraq and deposing Saddam. He genuinely admires President Bush, so the friendship with Washington strengthens his own position at home: when pressed about the wisdom of sacrificing British independence of action he always responds by saying that it's "worse than that" because he actually believes that it's the right thing to do.

Bush's people, on the other hand, only pay lip service to the relationship and tend to regard it as an outdated concept that was only useful for constructing a "coalition of the willing" before the tanks rolled towards Baghdad.

For far too long, the transatlantic alliance has been little more than a misty-eyed concept, strong on emotion but weak on any discernible reality. At the height of the Vietnam war, President Lyndon B Johnson was desperate for British support, as well he might have been. Britain had recently quashed a similar communist- inspired conflict in Malaya (as it then was) and the British Army are masters of low-intensity warfare. But for all Johnson's demands, canny Harold Wilson sensibly kept Britain well out of the fighting in southeast Asia.

A decade later, President Ronald Reagan turned the tables when he dithered over supporting Britain against Argentina over the Falkland Islands South America was in his bailiwick and he wasn't going to foul his own nest. The following year, Reagan calmly invaded Grenada, a Commonwealth island with strong links to Britain; again because it suited his interests.

That's what makes Myers's argument so compelling. Each side only plays up the special relationship when it suits their interests; otherwise they simply go their own sweet way.

All that Britain got for supporting the US in Iraq was the right for its prime minister to be treated as a temporary equal and to be hailed: "Yo, Blair, how ya doin'?" Not exactly the language of diplomacy, is it?

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