

Michael Parsons : The Special relationship

Discuss the following extract from the diaries of Britain's Ambassador to Washington in 1982

THE FALKLANDS

The diary entries on the Falklands conflict are intermittent and incomplete, probably because I was too busy and tired to make them fuller. I published an account afterwards of the efforts made by the USA to try to bring about a diplomatic solution. Unfortunately I was not allowed to reveal the nature or scale of the help given by the Americans in military supplies and intelligence. The American State
5 Department was frightened of the effect this might have on its relations with Latin America which had been bruised by Washington's support for London during the conflict; and the Foreign Office, in consequence, opposed publication out of respect for this fear. More ignominiously, the British Ministry of Defence did not want anything published that might blur Britain's individual blaze of glory.

10 Aware of what the US Department of Defence and, in particular, of what Mr Caspar Weinberger had done to make essential materiel of war available to the British forces at the speed required, and disturbed by the injustice of concealing it, I wrote to Weinberger to explain what had happened. In a characteristically philosophical reply he said that he had read my article before hearing from me; and that he had to 'confess ("vanity, vanity, all is vanity") a certain mild surprise that the entire story of
15 America and the Falklands was written without any passing reference to what our small department had tried to do both before and after the US took its strong position in support of Britain'. He expressed regret at the omission of information which he thought could have helped deter anyone from undertaking future adventures of this kind, apart from the boost it might give to the bilateral relationship. He said that, if I planned to write another piece covering some of the military relationship
20 of the US and UK during the Falklands War, he would be glad to see if the State Department could be persuaded to have the truth appear, or, alternatively, he suggested that I should seriously consider simply ignoring them.

I thought that it would be better to get someone else to tell the story of the materiel help given by the Americans. All the information would be forthcoming from Weinberger and his staff. I therefore
25 suggested that Simon Jenkins, then deputy editor of The Economist, should take it on, which he undertook to do. He proceeded to obtain the facts and have them published in his paper. This disclosed the scepticism of the US navy at the outset about the prospects for the success of the British task force. Britain was ill-equipped to fight a war in the South Atlantic. They lacked air surveillance; their satellite communications were inadequate. They were short of an effective air-to-air missile for the
30 Harriers. They had no base in the South Atlantic. However, Weinberger and the US navy were ready to fill these gaps immediately as best they could. They also perceived that the logistics problem could be solved by the extensive use of the American Wideawake airbase on Ascension Island. This had been leased from Britain which had a right under the lease agreement to use it in an emergency. It was four thousand miles away from the Falkland Islands but this was half as far away as was the UK.
35 Thanks to the close contacts between the navies of the two countries and, most of all, to the decisive intervention of Weinberger, an avalanche of supplies immediately started to pour into Ascension, e.g.

aviation fuel, the new Sidewinder air-to-air missiles (which proved to be the most decisive weapon of the campaign), Stinger anti-aircraft systems, and weapons and ammunition of all kinds. Not least important was the help the Americans provided over intelligence and communications. For me the most dramatic moment occurred when Weinberger took me aside at a party at the British Embassy. He said that he would be prepared to make a US carrier available to us in the South Atlantic if the military situation required it - an offer of spontaneous and practical generosity that must be unique in the annals of the Washington-London relationship.

It is impossible to exaggerate the contribution Weinberger made to our cause. As soon as the decision had been made to launch the task force - and a month before the USA openly declared its support for Britain - Weinberger, as he has written in his memoirs, 'made it clear that we would supply them with everything they needed ... ' This flatly contradicts the statement in President Reagan's autobiography that the USA provided no military assistance to the British other than the use of a military communication satellite during April.

Weinberger has admitted that 'we all knew of the enormous military odds against Britain'. As he realised at the time, and has explained in his memoirs, the normal course for meeting requests for materials and supplies could not be followed if America was to be of any real assistance: 'I therefore directed that all British requests were to have immediate and first priority, and particularly that our staff examination be drastically reduced ... I also directed that each of these requests come directly to my desk, something that would otherwise not have happened. Finally, I directed that I be told within twenty-four hours of our receipt of a British request, whether it had been granted, if not, why not and when would it be granted ?'.

Those most directly involved in the campaign, and the journalists and historians who have studied it closely in retrospect, have concluded that without American help the operation could not have succeeded as it did. Mrs Thatcher has written that 'without the Harriers . . . using the latest version of the Sidewinder . . ., supplied by Weinberger, we could not have retaken the Falklands'. Nobody minimises the fighting qualities displayed by the British forces in the campaign, but the hard fact is that they just did not have from their own resources the necessary equipment available in quality, quantity or in time. Weinberger is characteristically modest and generous on this subject, attributing the decisive factor to Mrs Thatcher's firm and immediate decision to retake the islands, despite the impressive military and other advice to the contrary. But he acknowledges that 'we certainly helped substantially in supplying resources more rapidly than would have been possible from elsewhere'. His conclusion is that the major factor in American assistance 'was the speed with which we fulfilled all British requests. I am told that not even during the Second World War were we able to, nor did we, respond so quickly to requests for military assistance. Speed was what they most needed'.

The political backing provided by the Americans was also crucial. Alexander Haig, the US Secretary of State, said to me repeatedly throughout the conflict that, however much the US government wanted and worked for a diplomatic rather than military outcome, which meant initially the adoption of a neutral attitude, it would not let its ally down as Washington had done over the Suez crisis.

Without seeking to describe the ups and downs of the diplomatic dialogue throughout the crisis, about which, as I say, I have already written an account, I must, in order to give the necessary background to the diary, pick out one or two nuggets from my frequent meetings with Haig. They may help to explain what was behind his policy which excited such controversy at the time, not least in the higher reaches of the British government. I do not attempt even to touch upon the hectic diplomatic activities at the UN where Tony Parsons was the British representative and managed to secure the passage of an all-important resolution, (Resolution 502) immediately after the Argentinian invasion, calling for their withdrawal from the islands.

When I saw Haig soon after the invasion I gave him a message from Frances Pym, who was now foreign secretary, having succeeded Carrington after his resignation (see entry for 10 April 1982). The message emphasised Britain's determination to bring about the withdrawal of Argentinian forces and the restoration of British administration, by whatever means were necessary. It also referred to the critical importance of the American role. Haig is a paragon of a fighting man and this was reflected in the quick-fire manner of his response to the message I had conveyed. But at the post he now occupied at the State Department his business was peace, not war, and his rapid reaction was directed to the need for urgent high-level mediation to head off military conflict. The course of action that he immediately suggested to me was mediation on his part to bring about negotiations which would lead to some mixed administration to run the islands.

I saw that, to avoid any risk of misunderstanding, I must clarify HMG's attitude. Our government could not enter into any negotiations of the kind he was thinking about until Argentinian troops had been withdrawn. The US administration would adopt the same stand if American territory, say Puerto Rico, were occupied by Cuban troops.

Haig could not see how General Galtieri could survive if he was forced to remove his troops without getting anything in return. I said that it was not our purpose to help Galtieri survive. There had been few international issues since 1945 about which the British had felt so unanimously and so strongly. If it was asked why we bothered about a mere two thousand people at the other end of the world, it was worth remembering how bitterly the Americans had felt about their fifty-two hostages held in Iran.

Assuring me that he fully understood the state of British public opinion on this issue Haig wondered, thinking aloud, whether it would not be possible to have some kind of interim administration appointed for the islands. If the USA were going to serve as mediator they would have to avoid taking sides. Haig admitted to me personally that at heart he was not impartial. He was very aware of the strength of the 'Latino-Lobby'. Mrs Jeane Kirkpatrick, the US Ambassador to the UN who had a seat in the US Cabinet, was probably the most influential member of this group. She did not consider that Argentina was an aggressor; it was simply asserting a long-stated claim to the islands. Argentina was an authoritarian but not a totalitarian regime. There was an important distinction. Buenos Aires had been giving America support for its covert operations in Central America and in anti-Communist causes throughout Latin America. Reflecting on this I realised that the Argentine junta may well have believed that in return for this the US government would acquiesce if it was to resort to force in the Falklands.

Haig was also sensitive to President Reagan's outlook on the matter. The President had described the Falklands as 'that little ice-cold bunch of land down there'. To a group of journalists he had said on 5 April that the USA were friends equally with Argentina and the UK.

120 There is no doubt that Haig reflected American public opinion in wanting a peaceful, rather than a military, outcome. He believed that it would be possible to bridge the gap between the Argentinian insistence that any settlement must in some way promote the transfer to them of sovereignty over the islands, and the British determination that Argentinian troops must be withdrawn and that nothing must infringe the right of the islanders to decide their own future. Hence Haig's shuttle diplomacy between London and Buenos Aires. He told me that he found Mrs Thatcher 'very tough', but added, 'I wish
125 we had more like her.' As for Argentina, Haig described to me the irrational and chaotic nature of their leadership. They were guided by no coherent or consistent strategy.

On April 24, after much travelling and discussion, Haig conveyed to the British Government a plan for a negotiated settlement that he considered reasonable for both sides. His intention was to put it to the Argentinian Junta. In her memoirs, Lady Thatcher records that Francis Pym favoured concurrence
130 in the plan; but that she did not like it at all. This produced a 'great crisis' - to use her words - in the Cabinet. She recalls that if Ministers had accepted Haig's proposals she would have resigned. Yet Ministers realised that to have turned them down would have been to have jeopardised the prospect of American support.

In this critical atmosphere the move the British Government decided upon - which, according to
135 Lady Thatcher's memoirs, was John Nott's brain-wave - was a finesse of which Talleyrand would have been proud. Lady Thatcher replied to Haig by saying in effect, 'Pass', explaining that as the crisis had arisen from the Argentinian aggression and as the security council had thereupon called upon them to withdraw from the Islands, the next step for Haig should be to put his plans to Buenos Aires. Knowledge of their attitude would be important to the British Cabinet in considering Haig's
140 ideas.

Haig did not demur to this. Making no effort to press for a substantial answer from London - for which London must surely have been grateful - he put his scheme to BA with a deadline. Long after this had expired the Junta replied baldly that their objective was 'sovereignty'. Haig construed this as a rejection. On April 30 he announced that negotiations had broken down and that the United States
145 would support Britain. He listed various restrictions on trade with Argentina, including military exports, and declared that the President had directed that the US would respond positively to requests for military materiel from Britain.

Reagan, like Haig, was prepared to acquiesce in Britain's finesse. In a message to Lady Thatcher he said: 'I recognise that while you see fundamental difficulties in the proposal, you have not rejected it'.
150 He also said that the US Government would not be releasing the text of the US plan because of the difficulty that that might cause London.

From Nicholas HENDERSON. *Mandarin: The diaries of Nicholas Henderson*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994, p. 442-447