

The South Atlantic conflict of 1982: a test for Anglo-American relations

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In the early morning of April 2 1982 Argentine armed forces invaded the Falkland Islands¹ in the South Atlantic. Taken very much by surprise, the British government, under the determined leadership of Margaret Thatcher, dispatched a substantial naval task force to repossess the islands and return them to British administration. American support was assiduously sought — the government was acutely aware of the need to avoid a repeat of the Suez crisis of 1956 — and this support was given, though it was only announced after almost a month of official neutrality. The Pentagon in particular provided logistic support and military equipment without which the war would probably have been much longer and the casualties much heavier, and this support began well before the President finally “tilted” in Britain’s favour. American assistance was thus immensely valuable and perhaps even decisive, though the extent of this help was not fully appreciated at the time. Nor could it be taken for granted. The United States administration was seriously divided on the issue, and indeed the conflicting signals sent to the Argentine junta by some sections of the administration may have encouraged the Argentines to think that their *coup de main* might go unchallenged, and might be accepted, if not condoned, by the United States².

So while there is some justification for seeing the South Atlantic conflict of 1982 as compelling evidence in favour of the existence of an Anglo-American special relationship, there is also a case to be made for seeing it as a revealing example of the tensions within Washington over foreign policy priorities. There were influential figures close to the President who felt that it was wrong to jeopardise the United States’ painstakingly developed anti-communist strategy in Latin America, simply to come to the aid of Britain in its almost desperate attempt to resume what many saw as a vestigial colonialist presence in the Americas. In the end it was the “pro-Europeans” who carried the day, much to the displeasure of the “Latin American” lobby. That final outcome should not however obscure the fact that the success of the “special relationship” was not a foregone conclusion. It is however interesting to note that public opinion in America overwhelmingly supported Britain³.

Support for Argentina before the conflict

Ronald Reagan began his term of office as president of the United States determined that his country should recover from the loss of confidence which had followed the Vietnam war and act more decisively to combat Communism. He was particularly worried by the situation in Nicaragua, which, he claimed, was “becoming a base for Communizing all of Central America”⁴. Argentina, since 1981 under a junta headed by General Galtieri, who was known to have great affection for the United States, became a valued ally in this struggle. Galtieri was given a warm welcome when he visited the United States. Galtieri intended to recover the Falkland Islands and may have sought support for this objective. It has been claimed by the indefatigable critic of Margaret Thatcher and the Falklands War, Labour MP Tam Dalyell — though this has never to my knowledge been substantiated — that General Vernon Walters, American Ambassador at Large and a fluent Spanish-speaker, told the Argentinians during a visit to Buenos Aires in the autumn of 1981 that he believed that Britain would “protest verbally but would do little else, if the Argentinians seized the Falklands”⁵. Mr. Dalyell repeated this allegation to the Committee of Enquiry which was set up shortly after the conflict under the chairmanship of Lord Franks, saying:

General Vernon Walters [...] was in Buenos Aires, intermittently, for many days, between October 1981 and February 1982. He discussed inter alia the setting up of a ‘South Atlantic Treaty Organisation’. He also discussed the advantages for such an organisation of an island-

¹ The Argentines call them the Islas Malvinas, a name derived from the French name Iles Malouines. Sailors from Saint Malo were regular visitors to the islands in the 17th and 18th centuries.

² see, for example, Rubén. O. Moro, *The History of the South Atlantic Conflict : the War for the Malvinas*, New York : Prager, 1989, p. 34

³ For example, on 29 April 1982, a poll found 60% of the US public were favourable to Britain, against 19% for Argentina. Max Hastings & Simon Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands*, London: Pan, 1997 (first ed 1983), p. 136

⁴ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life : the autobiography*, London : Hutchinson, 1990, p. 299

⁵ Tam Dalyell, *One Man’s Falklands*, London : Cecil Woolf, 1982, p. 119

base in the Falklands [...] However, the understanding was that the Agreement on hemispheric and other grounds, should be between the United States and Argentina, the bulwark of American policy in the South Atlantic, and not between the United States and Britain. Asked by the Argentine military what Britain would do, the Americans replied to the effect that Britain would 'huff, and puff, and protest, and do nothing', with the implication that the Americans would soothe ruffled British feathers⁶.

There are many other alleged sources of support. The assistant secretary for Latin American affairs, Thomas O. Enders, apparently told the Junta that the United States would remain neutral. According to the Rattenbach report which reviewed the Argentine junta's performance in 1982, Enders visited Argentina on March 8 1982 and met the President and Foreign Minister. He told them that the United States had no interest in the case of the Malvinas and that his country's position would be "hands off"⁷. Argentina also believed that American support for Britain would at least be hindered by its participation in the IATRA and the OAS⁸. It probably hoped that by presenting the issue as essentially colonialist, it could count on the United States' support for anti-colonialist resolutions in the United Nations. It might also have found some cause for comfort in the Monroe Doctrine, which, though never seriously invoked with respect to Britain's presence in the South Atlantic, could be considered as having some relevance.

It is in any case evident that the Argentines believed this — that Britain would gesticulate but not respond by sending her armed forces. "Authoritarian regimes" to use the terminology employed by Ms. Jeane Kirkpatrick, United States Ambassador to the United Nations in 1982 and a committed "Latin-American", do tend to assume that democracies are decadent and thus unable to take positive and decisive action. All the military planning for the occupation of the Falkland Islands assumed there would be no serious British response, and indeed once the islands had been taken, troops were actually flown back to Argentina, leaving only a small force to garrison them. The Rattenbach report explicitly accuses the Junta not only for having misjudged the situation, but also of failing to make the necessary adjustments once it became clear that the assumptions on which their planning had been based, that Britain would not react militarily and that the United States would not allow the crisis to escalate, were ill-founded⁹.

The level of support and encouragement apparently given or allegedly promised by some sectors of the American administration was such that one academic has suggested that it was done deliberately to draw the junta into a fight with Britain that it would then lose, thus paving the way for a civilian government, and, more importantly, putting an end to Argentina's programme of nuclear weapons development. This elaborate "sting" would also have the advantage of reviving the ailing fortunes of Margaret Thatcher, whom the President was keen to support (and whose unilateralist, interventionist Labour opposition the President and the US administration would presumably not have been keen to deal with)¹⁰. This "conspiracy theory" seems implausible in the extreme, if only because the risks involved were so great: it could all have gone spectacularly wrong. However, whatever the validity of the conclusions, the wealth of evidence cited leaves little doubt as to the existence of a strand or strands of American policy favourable to, or at least benignly neutral with respect to Argentina. In 1982, the "Europeanists" were stronger than the "Latin Americans" but it cannot be assumed that this will always happen. The ascendancy of the East Coast over the West was already being reversed, and the dominance of the "Anglo" component of the American population was already waning.

First responses: neutrality towards Argentina after the invasion

When the invasion actually did take place, and Britain did begin to respond militarily, Thomas Enders is quoted as having said that it would be madness to compromise the United States' position in Latin America over

⁶ *ibid*, p. 133 and Oscar Cardoso et al., *Falklands : the Secret Plot*, East Molesey : Preston, 1987, p. 12 (first Spanish edition 1983)

⁷ Comisión de Análisis y Evaluación de las responsabilidades políticas y estratégicas militares en el Conflicto del Atlántico Sur ('Informe Rattenbach'), # 72, www.nuncamas.org/document/militar/rattenbach/rattenbach12.htm

⁸ IATRA is the Inter-American Treaty for Reciprocal Assistance, which stipulates that in the event of attack (defined broadly and including, for example, communist insurgency) one a member state, the other signatories are bound to provide help, and the OAS is the Organization of American States. All OAS members with the exception of Canada and the members of the Caribbean Community (Caricom) are signatories to IATRA.

⁹ Informe Rattenbach, # 755, www.nuncamas.org/document/militar/rattenbach/rattenbach58.htm. See also Cardoso, *op. cit.*, p. 45-6

¹⁰ Richard C. Thornton, *The Falklands Sting*, London: Brassey's, 1998

something as trivial as the Falklands¹¹. His colleague Jeane Kirkpatrick shared this view, and indeed adopted a position of “neutrality” which sometimes seemed to tilt clearly in favour of Argentina. Sir Nicholas Henderson, Britain’s Ambassador in Washington, pointed on a number of occasions to the fact that on the very evening the invasion was taking place, Ms Kirkpatrick was dining with the Argentine Ambassador, only hours after the United States had issued a declaration formally denouncing the Argentine aggression¹². Ms Kirkpatrick held firm. Interviewed on CBS’ current affairs programme *Face the Nation*, she told the interviewer:

The Argentines of course have claimed for 200 years that they own those islands and the British have claimed that they own those islands and we have said we have no position on who owns the islands. Now if the Argentines own the islands, then moving troops into them is not armed aggression¹³.

President Reagan appeared perplexed and embarrassed by the whole affair. He did agree to Margaret Thatcher’s request to phone General Galtieri and make a last-ditch attempt to prevent the invasion. However, he failed, though that was hardly his fault: the Argentine naval detachment had already passed the point of no return and Galtieri studiously avoided making any commitments of any kind. When it became clear that the crisis was serious, and that Britain really meant business, President Reagan made a somewhat equivocal statement in the White House, saying, “It’s a very difficult situation for the United States, because we’re friends with both of the countries engaged in this dispute.¹⁴” Many in Britain felt that such even-handedness was unwarranted in a situation in which one country had quite simply invaded territory which had been in the peaceful possession of another country for almost 150 years. Nicholas Henderson asked how America would have felt if Cuba had occupied Puerto Rico and Britain had remained neutral¹⁵. He also recalled how worried the United States had been when 52 American embassy personnel had been held hostage in Iran; Argentina, he said, was now holding almost 2,000 islanders hostage in the South Atlantic. Reagan announced that he had asked Secretary of State Alexander Haig to play the role of an honest broker to try and achieve a negotiated solution — a policy which presented the inestimable advantage of postponing, perhaps indefinitely, the moment when the United States would have to decide. Reagan was then able to say that the United States had to remain neutral, for to do otherwise would be to compromise the negotiations (a position similar to that adopted by Harold Wilson in his successful attempt to keep British troops out of Vietnam).

There might have been another reason for the United States position of neutrality, and that is that many experts felt the enterprise would fail. Britain would be fighting a war 8,000 miles away from home against well-armed enemy forces, operating only 400 miles from their home bases, and enjoying the advantage of having time to prepare defensive positions. The British Chiefs of Staff were initially not optimistic about the chances of success if the task force were to be used not simply as a way of “concentrating the minds” of the Argentines in the diplomatic battle but as a force charged with establishing a beachhead and repossessing the islands militarily. United States military analysts were quite clear that Britain stood to lose. Some were distressed at what they saw as a needless and damaging diversion from NATO activities at a time of growing Cold War tension. Reagan’s somewhat disparaging remarks to the effect that the dispute was over an “ice-cold bunch of rocks” and other similar expressions suggest that he was not convinced that the issue was genuinely serious, in which case there must have been substantial frustration that the priority policy of combating communism in Latin America was being jeopardised by what many in Washington saw as a rather trivial and essentially colonial conflict. It also has to be pointed out that Britain did not consult the United States before deciding to send the force. Had it done so, it is almost certain that the advice would have been unfavourable. Margaret Thatcher adopted a Churchillian posture, declaring that the possibility of failure did not exist. Many in the United States thought that it would be better to achieve a diplomatic solution — almost at any price — before that confidence had to be put to the test.

Unofficial support for Britain

However some people in the United States administration felt that this was simply not good enough, and decided almost immediately that they should give Britain all the help she needed. Most notable was the Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger. He gave instructions that British requests for military materiel should be honoured

¹¹ Max Hastings & Simon Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 126

¹² Nicholas Henderson, *Mandarin*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994, p. 451-2

¹³ Jeane Kirkpatrick on *Face the Nation*, CBS, 11 April 1982, reproduced in BBC, *An Ocean Apart*, episode seven, ‘Turning up the Volume’.

¹⁴ Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters on Foreign and Domestic Policy Issues, April 5, 1982, Public Papers of Ronald Reagan, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1982/40582c.htm>

¹⁵ Nicholson, *op. cit.*, p. 445& 447

within 24 hours, and if this were not possible he wanted an immediate explanation. Interviewed for the BBC television series *An Ocean Apart*, Weinberger gave a very simple explanation for his decision: ‘ [...] it was clear that we had our ally in England and that we should help in every way that we could. That was not a unanimous view, I suppose, in the United States government, but it was the reaction I had and the reaction the President had’. Many Americans, within the US Navy and elsewhere, were comforted to see a western navy doing what it was there for. And once the task force had sailed, as it did very shortly after the invasion, some elements of the US administration felt that it would be disastrous for NATO if Britain lost. Not only would the West risk appearing weak, but the United States would stand accused of failing to come to the aid of a friendly country. So the Department of Defense leant over backwards to help. This did not involve setting up any new links between the two navies. John Lehman, Secretary of the Navy, told an interviewer for *An Ocean Apart*, ‘ ... most people in the American government simply don’t know how close the relationship is between the two navies and they didn’t know then how much was passing through the channels with direct support to the Falklands. There was no need to establish a new relationship because it flows all the time, and it was really just turning up the volume.’¹⁶ There is some doubt as to how much in fact Reagan and the rest of the Administration knew about this, a question to which I will return shortly. There is however no doubt whatsoever that the assistance provided was very substantial indeed, in the three essential areas of logistic support, military equipment and intelligence.

Britain’s logistic resources were stretched to the limit, if not well beyond the limit. Help in this field was therefore immensely valuable. The first and most vital way in which the Americans could help Britain was by making its facilities on Ascension Island immediately available. Ascension was an essential staging post, allowing supplies to be flown in and loaded on to the ships which had already sailed, as well as those which joined the task force later. Ascension is a British territory, but the base is leased to the United States. The terms of the lease do allow for Britain to have access in case of emergency, but invoking this would have taken time. As it was, the Pentagon cleared the base for British use without formality. But it did much more than that: it provided extra facilities, huge amounts of aviation fuel and vast quantities of equipment. All this was done in secrecy. Ascension was out of bounds to journalists, who assumed that this was for military reasons, perhaps to hide to the world how vulnerable it was. It is far more likely that the secrecy was designed to hide to the world the extent of American aid, and perhaps also to keep it a secret from those elements in the United States administration who were less keen to help. Admiral Henry Leach, then First Sea Lord, identified this as the most important aspect of American assistance.

Among the military supplies provided by the Department of Defense there can be no doubt that the most valuable were the latest-generation heat-seeking *Sidewinder* missiles. Because Britain had abandoned fixed-wing aircraft carriers long before the Falklands conflict, the only aircraft it could send to the South Atlantic were Harrier vertical take-off and landing jets. While these planes had many strengths, they only had a limited range and had to make sure that every shot would count. The “standard” *Sidewinders* with which they were equipped would only work if they were fired from behind the target aircraft. The new version delivered to the British forces could be fired at a target approaching from the side of the Harrier or even coming at it head on. This undoubtedly made the limited British air capability highly effective and contributed to reducing the impact of the skilled and courageous Argentine pilots. The Americans also supplied other important weapons, including ground-to-air missiles and anti-radar weapons.

Perhaps of less practical use, as it turned out at least, but spectacular in its implications, was an offer apparently made by Caspar Weinberger to the British ambassador in Washington. Nicholas Henderson recalls having been taken aside by Weinberger during a reception at the British Embassy in Washington and told that if one of the two British aircraft carriers were sunk, then the United States Navy would lend the British one of theirs.

And yet Haig told Buenos Aires on April 14 1982 that the US had not granted any British requests that went ‘beyond the scope of our customary patterns of cooperation’, and he claims in his book that this continued to be the case ‘while the diplomatic activity continued’¹⁷. Caspar Weinberger asserts that he was simply wrong¹⁸. It is not altogether implausible that he was not fully aware of what the Defense Department was doing. Indeed Haig was apparently less than supportive of Britain’s military activity when he did know about it. When he was told, on the insistence of Nicholas Henderson, of the impending attack on South Georgia, he apparently insisted that he should inform the Argentines. The ambassador told him that was unthinkable, and Haig eventually agreed not to say anything, but John Nott believes that the Argentines were told by staff from the State Department. ‘It is’,

¹⁶ BBC, *An Ocean Apart*, episode 7: ‘Turning up the Volume’

¹⁷ Alexander Haig, *Caveat*, New York, Macmillan, 1984, pp. 284-285 and 301

¹⁸ Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, London : Michael Joseph, 1990, p. 147

he commented, ‘*a frightening thing that our greatest ally is not wholly on our side*’. Sir John Nott also relates that when the War Cabinet decided to deploy Vulcan bombers from Ascension to launch an attack on the runway at Port Stanley, they learnt that the US commander on the island, who had been very helpful until that point, did not want the V-bombers to come and had indicated he would refuse aviation fuel for them. For Sir John it was evident that instructions had come from General Haig at the State Department. Sir Francis Pym, the Foreign Secretary, who was to arrive in Washington that day, was asked to protest and remind the Americans that under the terms of the lease they were obliged to allow Britain to use the runway in an emergency¹⁹. The protests must have succeeded, because the airfield at Port Stanley was bombed shortly afterwards by a Vulcan which took off from Ascension.

Finally, the United States also provided considerable intelligence support. Caspar Weinberger describes how American intelligence gathering was modified to provide Britain with more information:

Another aspect of our assistance was the production and sharing of intelligence. Normally our surveillance and general intelligence-gathering did not include keeping an eye on the Falklands. However, we have an essential degree of flexibility in these arrangements and were soon able to let the British see what we could see in that area. This, added to our joint efforts to gather intelligence, gave the British valuable advance knowledge of Argentinian movements and intentions. We were also able to provide some real help with our worldwide communications lines²⁰.

Some of that intelligence was provided before the United States officially announced its support for Britain. An SR-71 spy plane is believed to have flown a special mission over Argentina and the Falklands in the early days of the conflict²¹ and that there was much more assistance:

[...] in April 1982, at the outset of the Falklands war between Britain and Argentina, the US continued to provide Britain with SIGINT (obtained primarily by the NSG station at Galeta island, Panama), photographic intelligence (obtained from both SR-71 aircraft and KH-11 satellites), and ocean surveillance intelligence (including ELINT obtained by the WHITE CLOUD satellites), even though the avowed US policy was initially one of neutrality²².

This view may need to be qualified, according to Charles Grant, a former defence editor of the *Economist*, in a paper on Britain’s special intelligence links with the USA. He states that a former British Defence Intelligence Staff told him that during the first month after the Argentine invasion, America did not provide Britain with any high-quality satellite photos. He quotes him saying:

The Americans said there were technical problems with the satellites during Al Haig’s shuttle diplomacy ... The US gave us the good photos only after Argentina rejected Haig’s compromise. If Argentina had accepted that compromise, and Britain had rejected it, I doubt the Americans would have wanted to help us. In the final analysis they will always do what is good for the US — and therein lies the core of the UK’s problems.²³

Secretary of State Al Haig himself denied, in response to accusations made by the Argentines in mid-April 1982 — and has since confirmed this in his political biography *Caveat* — that the United States had supplied any ‘extraordinary’ intelligence material; indeed he claims that to his knowledge the only photographic material given to the British (and to the Argentines) were commercially available Landsat pictures. Furthermore Haig categorically asserts that the United States, ‘*provided no intelligence support before the collapse of negotiations, and, as Dick Walters told Anaya, British success in locating Argentinian ships might have been due to Argentinian bad luck or British technology, but it had nothing to do with American technology*’²⁴.

¹⁹ John Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow : Recollections of an Errant Politician*, London: Politicos, 2002, p. 298-300

²⁰ Caspar Weinberger, *op. cit.*, p. 152

²¹ Jeffrey Richelsen and Desmond Ball, *The Ties that Bind*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1985, p. 233

²² *ibid*, p. 304. SIGINT means signals intelligence and ELINT electronic intelligence; the NSG is the Naval Security Group.

²³ Charles Grant, “Intimate relations: Can Britain play a leading role in European defence—and keep its special links to US intelligence?” Working Paper, Centre For European Reform, April 2000, p. 12-3, <http://www.cer.org.uk/n5publicatio/cerwp4.pdf>

²⁴ Haig, *op. cit.*, p. 296

Sir John Nott confirms that satellite intelligence from one satellite was only made available late in the conflict, and it had apparently been difficult to persuade the Americans to tilt the satellite from its position where it was observing Soviet movements for NATO²⁵. This used valuable fuel and shortened the life of the satellite and was thus not welcomed by those in the Pentagon who saw the Falklands conflict as a distraction from the more serious issue of the Cold War with the Soviet Union²⁶.

The US was not the only source of intelligence information: there were others. For example, though it operates within the broad framework of the intelligence network which includes the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the Tangimoana signals intelligence station in New Zealand monitored Argentine naval traffic in the South Pacific, which ‘was used by Britain to form a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the Argentine Navy’s Order of Battle and its deployments’²⁷. Britain was also given valuable information by Chile. In her recent book *Statecraft*, Margaret Thatcher expresses her debt of gratitude to Chile, and to its former dictator Augusto Pinochet, for information about Argentine aircraft movements provided by the Chilean air force. She recalls that the attack on the *Sir Galahad* and *Sir Tristram* landing ships on May 8, during which over 50 British soldiers and sailors were killed, happened when the Chilean radar installations had had to be turned off for essential and overdue maintenance²⁸. France gave invaluable help regarding the operational capacities of *Mirage* and *Super-Étendard* aircraft and *Exocet* missiles. Indeed France even lent Britain one each of those fighter planes so that they could be used in training. Britain also had its own intelligence collection arrangements, including those on board the ice-breaking patrol ship based in the South Atlantic, *HMS Endurance*. The most valuable source of information after May 1 came from special service teams which were “inserted” on the islands from the British task force. They were even able to report back what food the Argentine troops were eating and how that was affecting their morale²⁹. Britain also had signals intelligence networks and, for example, had acquired confirmation of Argentine movements shortly before the invasion which Nicholas Henderson decided to show to Haig to convince him that this was serious and not an April Fool’s day joke³⁰. Haig was apparently intensely irritated that his own intelligence services had not been able to provide information about this.

It is difficult so soon after the event to know exactly what information was being made available and by whom. The Americans have apparently claimed, according to an article in the *Economist* published in March 1984, that they provided 98% of the intelligence concerning Argentine movements. This is probably an exaggeration, though I have no evidence for this. In any case it does not seem that the intelligence available was in any way complete: otherwise, how could the British have ‘lost’ the aircraft carrier *Veinticinco de Mayo* at a crucial moment on April 31? Even later, once the land battles had begun, most of the intelligence information of use to the British forces on the Falklands was collected using what Julian Thomson has called the ‘mark one eyeball’³¹.

“Tilt”

On April 30, Secretary of State Alexander Haig announced that the United States would henceforth respond to British requests for military equipment. Ronald Reagan does not seem to have appreciated the scale of military assistance already being given, or indeed the scale of the assistance which was to ensue. When he was asked about this at a press conference at the White House, he said:

That would only be in keeping with our treaties, bilateral treaties that we have with England by way of the North American [Atlantic] Alliance. And we’ve had — at this moment we’ve had no request for any such help from the United Kingdom. But I think what the Secretary was saying is, we must remember that the aggression was on the part of Argentina in this dispute over the sovereignty of that little ice-cold bunch of land down there ... I’m sure that we would [grant what

²⁵ Nott, *op. cit.*, p. 274

²⁶ ‘America’s Falklands War’, *The Economist*, 3 March 1984, p. 24

²⁷ Richelsen & Ball, *op. cit.*, p. 77

²⁸ Margaret Thatcher, *Statecraft*, London: HarperCollins, 2002, p. 267

²⁹ Nott, *op. cit.*, p. 273

³⁰ Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 448

³¹ Julian Thompson, *No Picnic: 3 Commando Brigade in the South Atlantic, 1982*, London: Leo Cooper for Secker & Warburg, 1985, p. 19, quoted in Lawrence Freedman, ‘Intelligence Operations in the Falklands’, in *Intelligence and National Security*, vol 1, no. 3, September 1986, p. 325

*materiel Britain requests], because I'm sure they wouldn't make any request that was not in keeping with the bilateral arrangements that we have.*³²

Indeed, in his autobiography, Reagan denies that any military assistance was provided to the British before April 30 other than access to satellite communication facilities under a long-standing agreement³³. Nicholas Henderson asserts that he was simply wrong. Perhaps, more than anything else, this reflects the divisions and tensions within the United States administration, under a President who was determined to stand back from his administration and let them get on with the job. There is substantial evidence that he was not kept fully informed. Nor do the National Security Council or General Haig seem to have been told very clearly about the military support Britain was getting, though General Vernon Walters, who accompanied Haig on his attempts at 'shuttle diplomacy', claimed in an interview screened as part of the BBC *Ocean Apart* series that he knew. But did he tell Haig?

It would certainly seem that for a considerable period during the conflict, support for Britain was to a significant extent 'Weinberger's own foreign policy' and, initially, 'almost a private venture by the Pentagon and American navy'³⁴. Even after the conflict was over, it was a while before the full extent of American assistance was made public. This was partly because the Americans wanted to limit the damage their support might cause in Latin America, and, or so it has been suggested, because some in the British Ministry of Defence were not keen to diminish the achievements of the British forces in any way. The first real information about American help was given in the March 1984 feature in the *Economist* mentioned above, after Nicholas Henderson had suggested to Simon Jenkins that it was unfair not to pay tribute to America's generous support.

Magnanimity before victory

Once Britain had established a beachhead on the islands, won the first major land battle of the campaign at Goose Green and begun to move out towards Port Stanley, American efforts turned towards pressuring Britain into accepting a cease-fire. On May 31, Ronald Reagan, apparently on the insistence of Jeane Kirkpatrick, phoned Margaret Thatcher to ask her to stop short of a complete victory. He was afraid this would almost inevitably lead to the fall of General Galtieri, which the US was keen to avoid. According to Nicholas Henderson the Prime Minister was dismayed at the President's attitude and found it quite inconceivable that after the major casualties which had been sustained by the British forces she should be asked to stop the fighting and negotiate. She must have spoken rather sharply to Reagan, who decided not to press the point. Nonetheless it would appear that the suggestion had been made that the United States might have to leave Britain on her own if she persisted. Margaret Thatcher was not impressed and argued her corner forcefully. Henderson recalls her saying, '*She had asked Reagan what he would think if some country invaded Alaska and then, when the Americans had thrown them out, they were asked to withdraw in favour of a contact group*'. Henderson twice uses the adjective 'withering' to describe Mrs Thatcher's tone³⁵. One can imagine the effect.

A day or so later the vacillation and conflicting interests within the United States administration led to another revealing episode. Early in the month of June, Panama and Spain tabled a cease-fire motion in the Security Council which came to the vote on June 4. Britain made it clear it would have to veto the motion, Sir Anthony Parsons arguing that Resolution 502, which he had skilfully secured in the Security Council immediately after the initial landing, called for Argentine withdrawal as a pre-requisite for any cease-fire. Haig gave instructions to the US Ambassador at the UN, Jeane Kirkpatrick, who would have preferred to abstain, that she should join Britain and veto the motion. However, after intense lobbying in Washington, and perhaps disappointed by the rejection of his earlier pleas for magnanimity, Haig changed his mind and sent instructions that she should abstain. However she received these new instructions too late: she had already voted. She then announced to an astonished United Nations that while she accepted that once a vote had been cast it could not be changed, she wanted it put on the record that if it had been possible to change the vote, then she would have abstained. The poor impression made by this confusion was compounded when, the following day, a journalist asked President Reagan, who was attending a summit meeting in Versailles, what he thought about the vote, and his response showed clearly that he knew nothing about it³⁶.

³² Remarks and Question-and-Answer Session with Editors and Broadcasters from Mid-Western States, April 30, 1982, Public Papers of Ronald Reagan, www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1982/43082b.htm

³³ Reagan, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

³⁴ 'America's Falklands War', *The Economist*, 3 March 1984, pp. 23-25

³⁵ Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 466

³⁶ see Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 468 and Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 297

Support for Britain in Washington, and particularly Reagan's support, seemed to be weakening: Nicholas Henderson gives the passage in his memoirs in which he recalls the Reagan-Thatcher phone conversation the title, *'The Widening Transatlantic Gulf'*³⁷. It is perhaps fortunate that the conflict came to an end less than a fortnight later, and so the gulf did not have time to widen much more. If anything it narrowed. President Reagan referred briefly to the conflict in his speech to the Houses of Parliament on June 8. His speech-writers gave him the following paragraph to read from the tele-prompter:

*On distant islands in the South Atlantic young men are fighting for Britain. And, yes, voices have been raised protesting their sacrifice for lumps of rock and earth so far away. But those young men aren't fighting for mere real estate. They fight for a cause -- for the belief that armed aggression must not be allowed to succeed, and that the people must participate in the decisions of government -- [applause] -- the decisions of government under the rule of law. If there had been firmer support for that principle some 45 years ago, perhaps our generation wouldn't have suffered the bloodletting of World War II.*³⁸

In conclusion ...

In his autobiography John Nott sums up the situation: *'The United States did not wish to choose between Britain, their principal NATO ally in Europe, and their interests in Latin America. Apart from Weinberger and the Pentagon, the Americans were very, very far from being on our side.'* And it was France who gave the most consistent support: *'Only Mitterrand and the French remained staunch allies to the end'* or again, *'In so many ways Mitterrand and the French were our greatest allies'*³⁹. He may perhaps have overstated his case a little, and the quotations taken out of context may exaggerate the comparison, but it is nonetheless interesting. In her autobiography, Margaret Thatcher also acknowledges Britain's debt of gratitude to the French. There are of course major differences between the French political system and that of the United States, and, at least as significantly, between the contribution that the United States could — and did — make to assist Britain, and the help that the French could — and did — provide. The French President has much greater power over his administration than does the President of the United States, especially where foreign policy is concerned. It is perhaps easier therefore to get a coherent policy response on such issues in France than in the United States, where competition or rivalry between different Departments may be intense. However, the military and intelligence contribution that the United States could provide was infinitely greater than that which France could offer. The support of the United States, even it was less steady than France's, was therefore much more important.

What conclusions can be drawn from the Falklands conflict with respect to the special relationship? If one looks at the core elements which lie at the heart of the special relationship, that is close cooperation on matters of defence and intelligence, it is clear that the Falklands war saw a very high degree of American help for Britain. There was a very close relationship at work between Britain and the United States at practically all levels of the military establishment, and the Americans seem to have taken some considerable pride in their ability to get essential equipment to the British in record time. As regards intelligence, it would seem that large quantities of material were passed to the British, largely as part of agreements which we now know have existed since the Second World War. Politically, the 'mediation' attempt pursued by Alexander Haig also seems to have been favourable to Britain, if only because it filled in the gap between the Argentine invasion at the beginning of April and the start of Britain's campaign to recover the islands at the beginning of May, giving the media something to report. Moreover, it has been suggested that the existence of the Haig shuttle reduced the risk of some less helpful would-be peace-maker rushing in. The government did however criticise the idea of 'mediation' in what they believed was a cut and dried case of 'naked aggression', and rather resented Haig and Reagan's attempts to force a compromise settlement at almost all costs. However, Haig had at least said from the start that there would be no repeat of Suez, and had also made it clear that if the US really were forced to take sides, they would have to come down eventually on the side of their NATO ally, Britain.

So while the even-handedness, real or merely official, may have been a severe irritant, the reality of the situation was that the US could afford neither to let Britain down nor to encourage the use of force to 'settle' outstanding territorial disputes. Beyond the South Atlantic, there was a much broader dimension. The security of the Western world against the Soviet Union, according to the standard NATO philosophy, relied on the principle

³⁷ Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 465

³⁸ President Reagan, Address to Members of the British Parliament, June 8, 1982. Public papers of Ronald Reagan, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1982/60882a.htm>

³⁹ Nott, *op. cit.*, p. 305

of deterrence. A would-be aggressor had to be convinced that whatever the cost any attack would attract rapid and effective retribution. For a key member of NATO to be allowed to suffer a defeat at the hands of Argentina was for the US unthinkable, so despite the conflict of interests, despite the very real damage that ensued in the United States' relations with Latin America, despite the sense in some quarters that the issue was a trivial anachronism, in the end it had little choice but to support Britain. It has to be said that the fact that the conflict was relatively short was an important factor. Had Britain become bogged down in some South Atlantic Vietnam, then US support might have wavered and the pressure for a negotiated peace, even on terms which would have been unacceptable to Britain, might have become irresistible.

The episode therefore shows a defence and intelligence special relationship working extraordinarily well. Politically, the relationship was at times less effective. Had the balance of power been different within the United States administration, or the issues involved been less clear-cut, or even American public opinion been less supportive, and especially if there had been a combination of all three factors, then the Falklands War might have become a case study in Anglo-American tension, followed by academic post-mortem examinations of the special relationship. One Suez was disastrous, two could have been catastrophic⁴⁰.

But such counterfactual speculation is fundamentally pointless. The United States did support Britain, and Britain did achieve victory in the South Atlantic (which is not to suggest that the underlying problem has been solved, of course). But although Ronald Reagan in his memoirs introduces the section devoted to the Falklands conflict with a tribute to the special relationship, he ends with a sentence which recalls that in foreign policy nations will quite naturally seek above all to preserve their own interests:

*Throughout the eight years of my presidency, no alliance we had was stronger than the one between the United States and the United Kingdom. Not only did Margaret Thatcher and I become personal friends and share a similar philosophy about government; the alliance was strengthened by the long special relationship between our countries born of shared democratic values, common Anglo-Saxon roots, a common language, and a friendship deepened and mellowed by fighting two world wars side by side. The depth of this special relationship made it impossible for us to remain neutral during Britain's war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands in 1982, although it was a conflict in which I had to walk a fine line.*⁴¹

The reference to a 'fine line' sits awkwardly with the heady rhetoric of the special relationship and indeed with the remarks made by the President in Westminster on June 8 quoted above, where he asserted that British forces were fighting to preserve the principle that aggression must not be allowed to succeed and that the rule of law must prevail. There can be no fine line with such firm principles. Similarly, Nicholas Henderson recalls a conversation with Alexander Haig shortly after the telephone conversation referred to above. The passage suggests that the conflict of interests, the ambivalence which is evident within the US administration was perhaps matched by a similar ambivalence in Haig's own mind. Henderson had just been speaking to Margaret Thatcher about her conversation with Reagan when he was told that Haig wanted to speak to him urgently:

When I got through he said that he had heard of the Presidential-PM telephone conversation. He was full of admiration for the PM, as was the President: 'I wish there were more like her ...' But he said that he saw great difficulties ahead in our relations. Opinion was moving against us. I asked him if he meant in Congress or the media⁴². No, he said, he meant the President and himself. In his characteristic way of saying two contradictory things in succession, he interjected immediately, 'Mind you, we are with you, make no mistake of that. We are on your side.' But, he went on, 'we can't accept intransigence.' If Mrs Thatcher insisted on that, the US would have to reassess its attitude.

Overall, the United States gave substantial support to Britain, perhaps more than some people had expected. There was no Suez, and in a difficult situation of conflicting interests the final decision was that in the end the US would have to take sides with Britain. But there were times when the support was messy, challenged, awkward and uncertain. If the Americans had had their way, if they had applied more pressure for a diplomatic

⁴⁰ Of course it was not Suez, as there was no suggestion of dishonesty in Britain's role in the crisis, the military aggression was, as Reagan was often to point out, initiated by Argentina, not Britain, and Britain did have the support of the United Nations, at least during the first six weeks or so, under UNSCR 502.

⁴¹ Reagan, *op. cit.*, p. 357

⁴² By all accounts both Congress and public opinion were often more solidly behind Britain than the US administration.

solution with a weaker Prime Minister than Mrs Thatcher, the outcome would probably have been what the former Foreign Secretary, Dr. David Owen, might have called ‘fudging and mudging’, an unsatisfactory compromise which would have delivered the Falklanders into the hands of one of Latin America’s most unpleasant dictatorships.

If there is one clear conclusion to be drawn from the episode, it is that there is a special relationship between the fighting forces of both countries, especially their navies, as well as between the intelligence networks. They know each other and trust each other. Their goals are not necessarily the same as those of their political masters, but when they are not too different, this ‘special relationship’ works. John Nott remarked on the closeness of the links between the navies and observed that ‘the intelligence agencies of the two countries virtually worked as one’⁴³. During the Falklands conflict, despite the political pussy-footing and Washington infighting, the special relationship, at least as applied strictly to defence and intelligence, undoubtedly did work very well indeed. Outside that core of defence and intelligence, the Anglo-American relationship was perhaps a little less close, and more obviously at variance in the course of the Falklands conflict with the US’ regional and hemispheric interests. But although Reagan said he had to walk a fine line, there seems at no point to have been any serious doubt that when the ‘chips’ were down, America could not afford to abandon one of her closest European partners, especially when the merits of the case were widely seen to be essentially in her favour.

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⁴³ Nott, *op. cit.*, p. 270

THE SOUTH ATLANTIC CONFLICT OF 1982: A TEST FOR ANGLO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

During the Falklands War of 1982, the United States provided crucial materiel and intelligence without which Britain might not have been able to repossess the islands. This is often cited as an example of the Anglo-American special relationship at work. However, the United States was keen to avoid having to choose between Argentina, a major ally in the war against communism in Latin America, and Britain, a vital ally within NATO. Consequently there were significant tensions and conflicts of interest within the United States administration. The episode illustrates a 'two-speed' special relationship, with the administration overall seeking primarily to preserve its own interests, even if that meant pressuring its European ally into accepting an unsatisfactory compromise, and the Department of Defense (and, to an extent which is difficult to assess in any detail, the intelligence agencies), which gave immediate and outstanding support. This is entirely consistent with the view that the 'special relationship' is most evident in the realm of defence and intelligence.

LE CONFLIT DE 1982 DANS L'ATLANTIQUE SUD : LES RELATIONS ANGLO-AMERICAINES A L'EPREUVE

Pendant la Guerre de Malouines de 1982, les Etats-Unis fournirent du matériel militaire et des renseignements sans lesquels le Royaume-Uni n'aurait peut-être pas pu reprendre les îles. Cela est souvent cité comme un exemple de la « relation spéciale » anglo-américaine à l'œuvre. Cependant, les Etats-Unis souhaitaient éviter de devoir choisir entre l'Argentine, un allié majeur dans la lutte contre le communisme en Amérique Latine, et le Royaume-Uni, un allié vital au sein de l'OTAN. Par conséquent il y eut des tensions et des conflits d'intérêt importants au sein de l'administration américaine. Cet épisode témoigne de l'existence d'une « relation spéciale à deux vitesses », où l'administration chercha globalement à préserver ses propres intérêts, même si pour cela il fallait imposer à son allié européen un compromis insatisfaisant, d'une part, et le Département de la Défense, ainsi que les agences de renseignement — même si leur apport demeure difficile à évaluer — qui ont proposé une aide immédiate et efficace. Cela confirme l'idée selon laquelle la « relation spéciale » est surtout évidente en matière de défense et de renseignement.