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Lyndon Johnson, Harold Wilson and the Vietnam War: a Not So Special Relationship?

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Introduction

The Vietnam war dominated United States foreign policy during the Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, and yet the international dimensions of the conflict are only now being explored in any depth by historians. George Ball, US Under-Secretary of State, famously admitted that Vietnam ‘made it very hard to get attention on anything else, that judgements tended to be colored by the Vietnamese situation…we were getting things totally distorted….In fact, I once drew a map for Dean Rusk [Secretary of State] and said, “this is your map of the world”. I had a tiny United States with an enormous Vietnam lying right off the coast.’ As an example of this Ball mentioned that the Johnson administration ‘pressed the British…hard to stay in line on Vietnam’. This comment reveals just how important allied support and cooperation was to the Johnson administration. With only five other countries fighting alongside them – Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Thailand and the Philippines – the diplomatic support of other key allies was crucial to America’s propaganda war. No country’s verbal support was more important than the United Kingdom’s. Not only was Britain the US’s closest ally, nominally at least, it was also a leading social democratic nation whose example was important, not least to the Commonwealth nations and in American liberal circles. However, the Wilson governments of 1964–70 found it exceedingly difficult to balance the demands of their transatlantic ally, who during a series of sterling crises was also their banker, with the outrage in their party and country at American action in South-East Asia. As a result, Harold Wilson’s hopes...
for a close working alliance with the Americans, which he expressed
during his first trip to Washington as Prime Minister, soon came
under threat. Almost immediately tensions over Vietnam soured
Anglo-American relations, and particularly the relationship between
President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson.

Most scholars of Anglo-American relations agree that the alliance
between Britain and America weakened substantially during the mid-
to late sixties, and have argued that this decline was epitomised, and
perhaps even hastened by a frosty or at best cool personal relationship
between Wilson and Johnson.\(^2\) The deterioration in the quality of the
transatlantic relationship can of course be attributed to a number of
other factors, particularly that both countries were increasingly aware
that Britain’s role as a world power was rapidly diminishing: decolonisa-
tion was in full swing, the country was over-stretched militarily, and its
economy was weakening. The power differential between Britain
and America was therefore more acute. By May 1967 the US Embassy
in Britain judged the ‘special relationship’ to be ‘little more than senti-
mental terminology’.\(^3\) That Johnson barely mentions Wilson and the
British in his memoirs indicates that he did not see Anglo-American
relations as a significant part of his years in office.\(^4\) And while Wilson
visited Washington seven times during Johnson’s presidency, the visits
were not reciprocated, Johnson never visited Great Britain during hisive years in the White House.\(^5\) The President’s heart and mind were
elsewhere: in South-East Asia. The Vietnam War clearly accentuated the
decline in the strength of Anglo-American relations.

This chapter will therefore attempt to shed light on the complex
relationship between two of the most colourful and puzzling characters
in the political world of the 1960s and assess the extent to which
Vietnam dominated and affected their public and private relationship.
The common perception of the Johnson–Wilson relationship is one of
master and servant, leader and follower. Left-wing political cartoonists
in Britain expended much ink portraying the Prime Minister in a
subservient role. Vicky in the New Statesman depicted Wilson as a
willing boy scout wanting to carry Johnson’s bags on Vietnam and the
Dominican Republic.\(^6\) And, in Gerald Scarfe’s now notorious cartoon of
April 1965, Wilson is shown licking Johnson’s backside while the
President remarks ‘I’ve heard of a special relationship, but this is ridicu-
ulous.’\(^7\) While portraying a gross oversimplification of their relationship,
these satirists were right to highlight that the relationship between
Wilson and Johnson was not one between equals. Despite this sort
of attack Wilson tried desperately hard to portray his relationship