Eagle versus Lion

When people in the United States and the United Kingdom encounter the term “special relationship,” several things often spring to mind: former colonial ties; English as a common language; cordial relations between presidents and prime ministers – Roosevelt and Churchill, Reagan and Thatcher, Clinton and Blair; and cultural exchange – Beatlemania and Motown to an older generation, and Michael Jordan, David Beckham, Beyoncé, and Adele to younger generations.

A more malevolent relationship is rarely evoked. The decades since the 1940s have seen the forging of an unprecedented level of military and intelligence cooperation between Washington and London. Between 1955 and 1975, the Vietnam War – the Vietnamese refer to it as the American War – claimed the lives of between 1.3 million and 3.1 million people, depending on which side you ask.¹ British Prime Minister Harold Wilson refrained from criticizing this bloodbath at the time by reportedly saying, “We can’t kick our creditors in the balls.” Since the 1990s, London has repeatedly supported American intervention in the Arab–Muslim world during wars on Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and now Syria that have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.²

² Some of us disagree that the world is a better place as a consequence of US global power supported by its junior partner in London. A British diplomat visiting Howard University several years ago seemed a little taken aback by my disagreement. The chaos and bloodshed in the Arab-Islamic world, the blowback in European cities, and the extension of the security state into the lives of American and British citizens over the past two decades suggest that the axis of good could not have got it more spectacularly wrong.
On the other hand, 2016 produced some interesting political developments that might unsettle this relationship. On June 23, a majority of the British electorate voted in a referendum to exit the European Union. On November 8, Donald Trump won the American presidency. Both results defied the bookies’ odds spectacularly. It is too early to forecast the implications for the special relationship. On the one hand, the military alliance remains intact. On the other hand, there are signs that Washington will seek trade deals with the bigger market of Brussels before it does business with London.

This post–World War II cozy relationship is far removed from the world of Anglo-American conflict some two centuries ago. Washington and London fought each other on land and sea, repeatedly clashed over maritime incidents, failed to mutually honor treaty terms, fumed when their citizens were occasionally killed by the other, and could not resolve outstanding claims over property disputes. These differences were shaped partly by a new republic proud of its independence and an old empire (Ireland, Caribbean, India) grappling with the massive loss of its mainland colonies. The heart of this conflict, however, was slavery. From the 1770s onward, Americans and Britons repeatedly clashed over the issue of slavery on battlefields and merchant ship, as well as in convention hall, courtroom, and consulate. The primary reason for this conflict, it is argued here, was because of the emerging contestation between a slaveholding republic and an antislavery state. Both were expanding. Both were in propinquity. And both were affected by generational processes. One cannot fully comprehend this Anglo-American clash without analyzing competing differences regarding slavery over an extended period of time.

During the late 1830s, the British state finally terminated chattel slavery after nearly two centuries of support for the lucrative colonial system. Emancipation, however, was an evolutionary process rather than a revolutionary transformation. Wartime measures designed to maintain the British Empire by winning colonial wars in two Anglo-American

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4 Sarah Ann Harris, “Donald Trump May Prioritize EU over UK for Trade Deal – And Remainers Aren’t Surprised at All,” April 22, 2017, The Huffington Post UK, www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/donald-trump-may-prioritise-eu-over-uk-for-trade-deal-and-remainers-are_58fb343be4b018a9c5bad4e.
conflagrations between 1776 and 1781 and also between 1812 and 1814 resulted in a small but not insignificant number of enslaved people seeking freedom within British territory. The outlawing of slave trading on British soil crept along beginning with England in 1772, Scotland in 1778 and Upper Canada (now Ontario) in 1793, culminating in parliamentary legislation against British participation in the Atlantic slave trade passed on March 25, 1807 and implemented on May 1, 1807. London’s legislation was momentous less because it reflected self-proclaimed national values of liberty and its expansion, but more because it effectively terminated the prodigious activities of the busiest transatlantic slave-trading nation globally.5

The integrity of colonial plantation slavery in the West Indies was also increasingly undermined during the early decades of the nineteenth century through growing intervention by the British state. Actions included legislation for registering slaves, the passage of amelioration laws, and the combined might of military and naval power to defeat massive slave rebellions in 1816 Barbados, 1823 Demerara, and 1831–1832 Jamaica. An Act for the Abolition of Slavery, passed on August 28, 1833 and implemented a year later on August 1, 1834, was the logical consequence of this expansive state power. Its passage was made possible by compensating former slave-owners in the British West Indies with GBP 20 million largely drawn from an increase in foreign sugar duties. Special magistrates representing London’s colonial office were responsible for overseeing the new labor system of apprenticeship. The system was terminated in 1838, two years prematurely, because planters and apprentices resisted the new “free labor” system. Planters thought the new system was too “free” and sought to control labor in old, coercive ways. Apprentices demanded access to land and compensation for their labor; they either used the state’s representatives to make their claims or protested with their feet against a system they thought too closely resembled slavery. Consequently, an alternative labor system of recruiting and transporting indentured workers from British imperial India was organized and managed by the colonial authorities to provide replacement workers for sugar plantations in Trinidad, Guiana, Jamaica, and elsewhere in the Caribbean.6

Moreover, the British antislavery state expanded its international reach. After clamping down on the nation’s slave-trading activities, the British government robustly pursued a diplomatic front against the continuation of the Atlantic slave trade through a series of treaties with several major slave-trading countries. These anti-slave trade treaties took four major forms. The first concerned the mutual right of search over shipping. Where incriminating evidence was discovered, it would be directed to courts of mixed commission that ringed the Atlantic Ocean basin. Conventions with additional regulations were signed with Spain (1817, 1835), Portugal (1817, 1842), the Netherlands (1818, 1822), Sweden (1824), Norway (1835), Brazil (1826), and Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador between 1839 and 1841. The second type of treaty concerned the mutual right of search without the complementary superstructure of mixed commission courts. Navy cruisers were required to hand over suspected slave-trading ships to respective domestic tribunals of parties as agreed in 1831 and 1833 conventions between Britain and France. Numerous other states including Denmark, Haiti, and the European provinces joined these Anglo-French conventions. In exchange for ceding some sovereignty on the high seas, these nations gained financial aid, military support, and trading benefits. It is noteworthy that the United States refused to sign either of these two types of treaties. The third form consisted of a mutual obligation to strengthen coastal Africa squadrons. For example, the 1842 Webster-Ashburton Treaty (examined more fully in Chapter 8) committed the United States to an eighty-gun squadron off the West African coast. By the mid-1840s, the combined force of the anti-slave trade squadron reached nearly sixty British, French, and American cruisers while the Portuguese–Angolan squadron stationed four to five ships after 1843. The fourth type were anti-slave trade treaties between Britain and the African states of Madagascar, Zanzibar, and Muscat.

Eloquently presented as humanitarian philanthropy to meet its powerful abolitionist lobby at home, London’s key aims included restricting foreign competition with its own sugar-producing colonies as well as the expansion and consolidation of its global power through the gunships of the Royal Navy. By the late 1830s, most slave-trading nations, with the exception of the United States, had signed antislavery treaties with Great Britain. Washington’s refusal was due partly to concerns about British interference with American commercial activity as well as fears of compromising its own national sovereignty. Thus, numerous transatlantic slavers from Europe, Brazil, and elsewhere hoisted the American flag in the hope that this would protect them from interference from the Royal Navy.9

Sea power buttressed these numerous diplomatic protocols. By the mid-1840s, 15 percent of British warships and 10 percent of total naval power was allocated to anti-slave trade activities. By the 1850s, transatlantic slavers were being pursued and intercepted by twenty-six ships and 2,000 personnel of the West African Squadron. Their impact on the Atlantic slave trade was substantial. Between 1807 (British slave trade abolition) and 1867 (Spanish slave trade abolition), some 160,000 Africans were liberated from the holds of more than 600 slave vessels belonging to those who had broken treaties and agreements. Of this number, around 94,000 Africans were liberated from transatlantic slavers and settled in the new British colony of Sierra Leone between 1815 and 1835. Most were detained on British orders. Most were stopped outside British territorial waters suggesting the enthusiasm with which London’s admiralty ignored comity.10


These antislavery actions were carried out by the world’s mightiest maritime power. In October 1805, the Royal Navy defeated the French Navy at Trafalgar, thus ensuring domination of the seven seas that was to last for nearly a century until the rise of the Imperial German Navy in the last decades prior to the First World War. During the Napoleonic Wars, the Royal Navy boasted 500 ships and 100,000 seamen.\(^1\) By the 1840s, New Orleans editor James D. B. De Bow estimated that the Royal Navy consisted of 636 vessels with 17,681 guns operated by 40,000 seamen with 141 war steamers. The magnitude of this maritime might is illustrated by comparison with the fifteen other naval powers with a combined total of 1,497 vessels bearing 28,802 guns with 122,098 men and 135 war steamers. In other words, De Bow’s estimates suggest that London controlled 42 percent of the world’s vessels and 62 percent of these ships’ gun power, and employed 32 percent of all of the sailors. This is reflected in the words of James Thompson’s popular nationalist song: *Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves.*\(^2\)

While the British antislavery state was expanding, the American slave-holding republic was also on the march. The admission of Alabama, Missouri, and Arkansas to the Union in 1819, 1821, and 1836 respectively, together with the annexation of Florida and Texas and their joining the union in 1845, massively expanded the real estate of slaveholding states together with their political power in the US republic. Slaveholders dominated federal government posts. Between 1788 and 1850, they controlled the presidency for five decades, the House Speaker’s chair for four decades, and chairmanship of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee for forty years. Eighteen of thirty-one Supreme Court justices owned slaves.\(^3\) President John Tyler, the tenth president of the United States, owned slaves.\(^4\)\(^5\)


States who served between 1841 and 1845, hailed from a traditional slaveholding Virginia family. Several electronic sources summarize succinctly his political career, although the reader has to look closely for references to his propertyed inheritance and ownership of slaves. There is little doubt that this slaveholding heritage helped shape President Tyler’s enmity toward British actions in response to the Creole revolt. In late June 1842, British envoy Lord Ashburton informed British Secretary Lord Aberdeen that the “President, as a Virginian, has a strong opinion about Creole cases [sic], and is not a little disposed to be obstinate over the subject.” Virginia slaveholder Andrew Stevenson served as American minister to Britain between 1836 and 1841. He was serving in London when the United States sought compensation for the liberation of slaves from the slave ships Encomium and Enterprise. He reported British opposition, no doubt because of the recent passage of colonial abolition. John Forsythe hailed from Georgia where he owned slaves and supported American slavery. His reward for loyalty to President Andrew Jackson was the post of Secretary of State from 1834 to 1841 where he denied British claims to search American vessels for slaves. Although his successor Daniel Webster hailed from New England’s abolitionist heartland, the new Secretary of State repeatedly insisted on the maritime rights of US merchant ships, opposition toward


15 Ashburton to Aberdeen, June 29, 1842, Folder 133–5, Add. MS 43123, Aberdeen Papers, British Library (BL).

16 See Chapter 3.


interference with the coastwise slave trade, and the sanctity of property rights in slaves during his tenure in Washington.¹⁹

The political and judicial power of southern slaveholders was underpinned by enormous economic clout. By 1860, cotton exports were earning $192 million for the United States. Some 80 percent of all enslaved people worked in the fields, and nearly 75 percent worked on cotton-growing farms. Most important, nearly 60 percent of total exports from the United States consisted of slave-grown cotton.²⁰ When South Carolina senator and cotton planter James Henry Hammond proclaimed, “No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king,” he was not only stating the white stuff’s global significance, but also the indispensability of southern slaveholder’s political power in the American republic.²¹

Moreover, the slaveholding republic wielded substantial power beyond its national borders. In 1823, President James Monroe submitted his doctrine to Congress and the world. The Virginia slaveholder supported anticolonial movements in the hemisphere, pledged non-interference in European affairs in both old and new nations, and warned that European interference in the New World would be considered a threat to the national interests of the United States.²² The rapid expansion of the national economy encouraged the establishment of a network of consular agents in seaports around the world. Their mission was to encourage trade opportunities for shippers as well as to deal with any problems that might emerge between merchants and the foreign nations in which they

19 See Chapter 8.
21 I explain to students that cotton expanded the antebellum US economy the same way automobiles drove the post–World War II US economy, and information technology has done since the 1990s. The key difference, of course, is that carmakers and IT firms are not officeholders the way cotton planters were.
22 John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, and Susan H. Armitage, Out of Many: A History of the American People, 4th ed., vol. 1. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2005), 265. To be sure, this economic and military domination of the Western hemisphere was only realized from the early twentieth century onward. But we should not forget that successful secession by the Confederate States of America would have established the most powerful slaveholding nation in the modern world.
John Bacon in Nassau, Bahamas, was one such consul who had to deal with the fallout from the Creole revolt as we shall see in Chapter 6. The US Navy was much smaller than the Royal Navy with only seventy-seven vessels carrying 2,345 guns with 8,724 seamen and five war steamers by the late 1840s. But canny southern editor De Bow already understood the key role maritime power played in empire building. The dress rehearsal would be the Union’s successful naval blockade of the Confederate States of America during the early 1860s. This understanding was fully implemented several decades later under the influence of naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan and the expansion of American naval power throughout the Caribbean and Pacific Oceans.

Local officials occasionally declared their colonial convictions. Bahamas Governor Sir John Carmichael Smythe wrote to Lord Viscount Goderich, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, informing him that, whatever decision was made about American captives whose slaver was grounded in the Bahamas as a consequence of foul weather, the governor would “not permit these eleven men to be taken away as slaves.” In 1840, Sir Edmund Lyons protested the practice of Greek vessels engaged in trading slaves on the Barbary Coast. In his deposition to the Nassau commission in April 1842 concerning the Creole revolt, Attorney General George Campbell Anderson favored “general emancipation,” even though he was a person of European, not African, descent. Moreover, he supported British colonial abolition unequivocally. As “slavery is abolished throughout the British dominions,” the colonial jurist wrote, “the moment a vessel comes into a British port with slaves on board, to whatever nation such vessel may belong, and however imperious


De Bow, “Merchant Fleets,” 331.

According to a recent biography of Gideon Welles, secretary of the US Navy from 1861 to 1869, the federal fleet increased from ninety ships – with only forty-two in commission – in 1861 to 700 vessels in 1865, only second to Britain. See Spencer Tucker, review of The Civil War Diary of Gideon Welles, Lincoln’s Secretary of the Navy, William E. Gienapp and Erica L. Gienapp, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), Journal of American History 102, no. 2 (Sept. 2015): 566.


Smythe to Goderich, January 31, 1831, Bahamas Ledger, 1831, vol. 1, pp. 28–29, CO 23/84, TNA.

Huzzey, Freedom Burning, 50.
the necessity may have been which drove her into such port, such slaves became immediately entitled to the protection of British laws, and that the right of their owners to treat and deal with them as slaves, ceases.”

Conversely, American officials defended slave interests beyond municipal boundaries. US Consul Bacon in Nassau went to great lengths to defend property rights in slaves as well as to secure the arrest, return, and trial of those responsible for mutiny and murder aboard the Creole. At the same time, however, it is fair to point out that not all officials toed the proslavery line in foreign relations. Henry A. Wise, US Minister to Brazil between 1844 and 1847, pursued a robust policy against illegal transatlantic slave trading under cover of the American flag during the 1840s. George William Gordon – New England blue blood, failed merchant, and federal postmaster – served as US Consul to Rio de Janeiro beginning in 1844 and spent much of his time documenting, writing up, and protesting the barely legal as well as illegal activities of New England slavers in the South Atlantic slave trade between Central Africa and Northern Brazil.

Although the state was a critical actor in the expansion of American slavery and British antislavery, it is important not to overlook the role of civil society – especially the actions of ordinary women and men – and how these differed from one another. Mass mobilization played a critical role in ending the British slave trade. It also contributed toward the abolition of colonial slavery as well as the early termination of the apprenticeship system that was condemned for its similarity to previous forms of forced labor. It was also mobilized to oppose Asian indenture – especially the slave-like shipping conditions with poor treatment and high mortality rates – although this particular unfree labor system survived until 1917.

During the 1830s through the 1850s, British men and women turned to organize against American slavery in multiple ways, including the organization of joint conventions, publishing and purchasing ex-slave narratives.

60 Mason, “Keeping Up Appearances,” 824. Wise went on to become the thirty-third governor of Virginia, and a brigadier general in the Confederate States of America.
62 Gelien Matthews, Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Verene A. Shepherd, Maharani’s Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2002).