

The Special Relationship: Fact and Fiction

by Michael Curtis



In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost. Just friends, but not like before. Two friends drifting apart. The story ends and we're just friends.

The association between fiction and reality is sometimes elusive in politics as in literature and life, as firm believers in a supposed truth battle with hard or soft skeptics. Occasionally, a character in fiction is so impressive it seems lifelike, shaping the culture of our minds: Hamlet, Lear, Harry Potter, Elizabeth Bennet, are assumed as real by admirers or believers. But the gap between fiction and reality is of international significance in the refusal by President Joe Biden to appreciate the real consequences of his decision to adhere to his arbitrary deadline of August 31, 2021 for withdrawing all U.S. troops

from Afghanistan. One can but conclude that the Biden administration's lopsided explanations, spin, and misstatement of events is driven more by partisan politics and a position of weakness than truthful presentation of reality.

People throughout the ages have embraced strange beliefs and deceptions. In 1858 at a grotto near Lourdes in southwest France a 14 year old peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous claimed that the Virgin Mary, identifying herself as the Immaculate Conception, appeared to her 18 times. Equally questionable, though popular, beliefs, are the Bermuda Triangle with mysterious disappearances of aircraft and ships, the Turin Shroud bearing an image of a man, perhaps Jesus, or the large, humped monster that has for centuries been inhabiting Loch Ness in the Scottish Highlands.

What and who to believe? In August 2021, Hollywood director Spike Lee admitted he believes in a 9/11 conspiracy theory that one of the World Trade Center skyscrapers was brought down by controlled demolition, not a terror attack, because not enough heating jet fuel could melt the steel, and the WTC collapsed like those in controlled demolitions. A group, Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, believes the U.S. government was involved with the collapse of WTC.

A new suspension of factual perspective concerns Count Dracula, the Transylvania character from the 1897 novel by Bram Stoker. He is the most famous vampire in literature and film, famous for biting people, infecting them, and turning them into vampires. In the novel the Count goes to the seaside town of Whitby, Yorkshire, where the 900 year-old St. Mary's Church is located. No location is set for Dracula's death or his body which ends in dust. But now, the remains of the fictional character have been found in the Churchyard of the Church. Hundreds of tourists have made the pilgrimage to the Church in search of his grave, though staff have put up a sign telling tourists there is no grave for Dracula.

Elvis Presley, king of rock and roll, would be 86 today. Doctors and a coroner said he died in August 1977, aged 42 and flowers adorn his grave in his mansion in Graceland, Memphis, Tennessee But countless people believe he faked his own death, probably to escape the Mafia since he was an FBI agent, and is living in Ibiza: his hair is gray, he sports a goatee beard, but his features are unmistakable. Elvis is only the most prominent of those celebrities who faked their death; he is joined by film star James Dean, wrongly supposed to have died in car crash in 1955 and Michael Jackson said to have ended with drug death in 2009.

The issue of fact and fiction is more meaningful in contemporary international relations. A major consequence of the turmoil in Afghanistan today caused by the refusal of President Joe Biden, to alter his unilateral timetable to exit Kabul, is that it increased the damage inflicted on allies and friends, and has led the possible demise of the "special relationship" between the UK and the U.S. which purportedly projected power and influence in securing a cohesive Western approach in the world. In these circumstances it is pertinent to ask. "Is the special relationship fact or fiction?" The term was coined by Winston Churchill in his "Iron Curtain" speech at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri on March 5, 1946, eager to maintain the relationship of close allies in World War II. The concept was that the level of cooperation between the two countries in trade, commerce, military affairs, intelligence sharing, is unparalleled among world powers.

The special relationship has always been uneven. At times, relations between leaders of the two countries have appeared close: Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan rode horses together and danced in the White House. and there appeared to be cordial rapport between Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. But there were always American skeptics of the meaningfulness of the relationship, even before Churchill's

speech. Dean Acheson was caustic, "Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role." The two countries differed over issues, such as the Arab-Israeli war in 1973, over the issue of a nuclear alert, and over British policy in Northern Ireland. President Barack Obama declared in April 2016 that the UK would be at the "back of the queue" in any U.S. trade deal if Brexit took place.

However, the relationship has been worsened by the U.S. unilateral action, the virtual exclusion by Biden of the UK, as well as other NATO members, from conversations and decisions over Afghanistan. The relationship seems to have reached a low point.

The "special relationship" has always been partly based on cordiality and warmth between the two leaders as well as on political factors. Biden seemed to have little interest in what Boris thought, and refused for a day and a half to talk to him on the phone.

The operation in Afghanistan was technically a NATO operation including the UK, and all members of NATO have been affected by the dramatic consequences of the unilateral, if not isolationist, U.S. withdrawal. Realistically, the UK has realized it is a junior partner, at best a restraining force, of the U.S. British political leaders have been scathing over U.S. policy and actions. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who took Britain into Afghanistan in 2001, asserted that the abandonment of Afghanistan and its people is tragic, dangerous, and unnecessary. The world is now uncertain of where the West stands because it appears that the U.S. decision to withdraw and its execution was driven less by grand strategy but by political calculation. A tangible demonstration is needed to show that the West is not in retreat. One suggestion of the Boris Johnson government is that the UK work alongside Russia and China to exercise a moderating influence over the Taliban. Former Prime Minister Theresa May echoed this. Did we just think we had to follow

the U.S. and on a wing and a prayer it would be all right on the night?

Perhaps the most moving and passionate criticism of Biden was made by Conservative MP, Tom Tugendhat, chair of British foreign affairs committee, a Catholic of Jewish ancestry, former reservist intelligence officer. He called Biden shameful for blaming the Taliban victory on a cowardly Afghanistan military. In the House of Commons, he was pained to see the U.S. Commander in Chief call in question "the courage of men I fought with. Those who have never fought for the colors they fly should be careful about criticizing those who have."

Biden has refused to extend the deadline for evacuations from Kabul beyond August 31, though Boris, as well as Macron and Merkel want the airlifts to go on longer,

The humiliated Boris explained that he had urged Biden to extend the date of the U.S. withdrawal but Biden had refused and stood squarely behind his original decision, and would continue U.S. emergency air lifts as long as possible .

At the virtual G7 meeting on August 24, 2021, Boris asserted that the UK will continue to conduct airlifts right up to the last moments while pleading with the Taliban to let people leave after August 31. Boris said after the meeting, that what done at the G7 is that the leading Western powers agreed "not just a joint approach to dealing with the evacuation, but also a roadmap for the way in which we are going to engage with the Taliban."

For Britain the time when the UK could rely on a special relationship to project power and influence in a cohesive Western approach seems to have come to an end. Winston Churchill who was so concerned for Atlantic solidarity must be saddened.