

**Wallace, W. (2005) 'The Collapse of British Foreign Policy', *International Affairs*, Vol 82 No 1 pp 53-68**

British foreign policy has tried to punch above its weight for the past half century, while balancing between different sets of international allegiances. For Winston Churchill, Britain could compensate for its loss of empire by playing a role in 'three circles': the British Commonwealth and Empire, as it still was, the transatlantic Anglo-Saxon partnership, and the links with our continental European neighbours. Later, as the Commonwealth connection shifted from apparent asset to apparent burden in the course of the 1970s, when the problems of Rhodesia/ Zimbabwe loomed over British governments and the caucus of African governments within the Commonwealth replaced deference to Britain with demands on Britain, the preferred image shifted from three circles to two stepping-off points, the United States and western Europe, with Britain acting as the 'bridge' between them .... New Labour reasserted the 'guiding light' principles of British foreign policy, as Tony Blair described them to his audience at the Lord Mayor's Banquet on 10 November 1997. British foreign policy, he argued, should aim to 'be strong in Europe and strong with the US. There is no choice between the two. Stronger with one means stronger with the other. Our aim should be to deepen our relationship with the US at all levels. We are the bridge between the US and Europe. Let us use it'.

My contention is that the bridge has again collapsed, and that it cannot now be rebuilt. It cannot be rebuilt because the assumptions underlying the claim that Britain could wield exceptional influence in Washington were already weak, and have now been shown to be without foundation. Long-term trends, in world politics since the end of the Cold War and within American domestic politics, have left British governments without either levers of influence over US administrations or appeals to shared values that resonate with the US electorate. With Blair, as with Macmillan and Thatcher before him, the cultivation of a special relationship with Washington has weakened rather than strengthened the parallel pursuit of close relations with our continental neighbours—partly because the priority given to Washington has detracted from prime ministerial attention to multilateral European politics, and partly because Britain's European partners resist the idea that their links with Washington should be channelled through London.

Blair has failed, too, to shift American policy towards multilateral cooperation in general, and towards working through the UN in particular. This is not surprising; the sheer weight of American military power, and the absence of any coherent diplomatic counterweight, make the costs and delays of multilateral cooperation much more evident to Washington policy-makers than the benefits. Closer cooperation with other European states—who collectively contribute, with Britain, some 40 per cent of the UN's budget overall, and nearly 50 per cent of its peacekeeping budget—and with the major states of south and east Asia in strengthening international institutions and supporting the rule of international law is the only way Britain can hope to persuade any US administration that multilateral cooperation serves its interests. Both neoconservatives and realists in Washington have made clear their respect for power, and their dislike for multilateral diplomacy and for the formal rules of international law; close personal relations with the White House, unsupported by a balancing coalition of states, could not hope to outweigh their influence. British hopes of acting as a durable bridge between institutionalized Europe and the United States necessarily rest on continuing American acceptance that closer cooperation among European states is in America's interest ...

[Blair therefore fell] victim to the illusion of the special relationship that has gripped so many of his predecessors, disregarding the accumulation of evidence that British governments on their own carry limited weight in Washington. In demonstrating that Britain must be the first in America's 'coalition of the willing', he has neglected the building of multilateral coalitions in Europe. Britain can keep a sceptical US administration committed to transatlantic partnership, to multilateral institutions and to global cooperation only from within a more coherent European grouping.