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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

“Mr. Brexit”: Donald Trump and the UK’s Departure from the European Union

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The two electoral shocks of 2016 – the United Kingdom’s vote to leave the European Union (‘Brexit’) and Donald Trump’s election as President of the United States – left observers aghast or elated. For those who found themselves in the former category, the outcome of the Brexit referendum represented a crisis that dwarfed any other challenge the European Union had faced in recent years, while Trump’s victory was seen as a “profound shock to the west, one that calls into question the future of its democratic model and the liberal international order.”¹ For the latter group, Brexit was an enormous victory over an “arrogant, out-of-touch political class.”² Similar feelings could be found across the Atlantic, as Fox News claimed that the result of the 2016 presidential election was a “national rejection of both the traditional media and the Hollywood elite.”³ The one shared sentiment among the majority of observers was surprise. Before polls closed on 23 June 2016, even Nigel Farage, former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party and a key figure in the campaign to vote Leave, said he thought Remain would win the EU Referendum.⁴ Only a small minority had the prescience to know that the conditions for both outcomes had been building for some time. Jonathan Haslam was among the few who thought that Trump’s election was “likely” due to “burgeoning blue-collar resentment and dissenting opinion among longstanding Democrats.”⁵

Reactions were not the only resemblances between the 2016 EU Referendum and 2016 presidential election. As Graham K. Wilson writes, there are some similarities between the themes explored in the campaigns: immigration, the triumph of ‘ordinary people’ over the ‘elite,’ and the restoration of national pride. Overlap can also be found in terms of personalities.⁶ Farage endorsed Trump and made several appearances at campaign events. Trump crowned himself “Mr Brexit” on Twitter.⁷ But the linkages go deeper. In an article for the *Guardian*, the journalist Carole Cadwalladr revealed the role of Cambridge Analytica in collecting data about and targeting voters on

¹ Chris Morris, “Biggest Crisis yet for Brussels,” BBC News, June 24, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36616018>; and James Blitz, “Brexit Briefing: What Trump’s Victory Means for Britain,” *Financial Times*, November 9, 2016.

² Cover of the *Daily Mail*, June 25, 2016.

³ Dan Gainor, “Trump Triumphs – Media’s ‘Primal Scream’ is Heard Round the World,” Fox News, November 9, 2016, <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/trump-triumphs-medias-primal-scream-is-heard-round-the-world>.

⁴ Charlie Cooper, “EU Referendum: Nigel Farage Says it ‘Looks like Remain Will Edge It’ as Polls Close,” *Independent*, June 23, 2016.

⁵ Jonathan Haslam, “The Significance of the Trump Presidency,” *H-Diplo International Security Studies Forum*, January 24, 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5h-trump-significance>.

⁶ Graham K Wilson, “Brexit, Trump and the Special Relationship,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19:3 (2017): 544-545.

⁷ Andrew Buncombe, “Nigel Farage Endorses Donald Trump as ‘Force for Change’ ahead of Joint Appearance in Mississippi,” *Independent*, August 24, 2016; and Dominic Rushe and Nicole Puglise, “Trump’s Declaration He’ll be ‘Mr Brexit’ Opens Speculation Floodgates on Twitter,” *The Guardian*, August 18, 2016.

behalf of both the Trump and Vote Leave campaigns. The firm was owned and funded by Robert Mercer, an American hedge fund billionaire, prominent donor to the Trump campaign, and friend of Farage.⁸

Given the parallels and connections between the two, it makes sense that since 2016 a series of debates have emerged about the consequences of Trump's election for the Brexit process and, more broadly, the repercussions of the UK's exit from the European Union for Anglo-American relations. A full assessment of those implications will have to await the opening of archival records. Nevertheless, now that Trump's time in the White House is over, at least at the time of writing this essay, the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement has been signed (in force from 1 February 2020), and the post-Brexit trade deal, the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, is operating (as of 1 May 2021), it is possible to begin to assess the impact of the Trump presidency on the UK's departure from the European Union.

One debate that has emerged in recent years asks a seemingly straightforward question. Did Trump's election make the Brexit negotiations easier or harder for the UK? Prior to the referendum, Trump, then the Republican Party nominee, announced he was in favour of a Leave vote, although he stressed that this preference was an opinion and not a recommendation.⁹ As a prominent politician in one of the key allied states of the UK, Trump's backing of Brexit, in addition to pressure from the Republican Party to negotiate a U.S.-UK free trade deal, seemed to suggest that if the UK could not get a beneficial trade agreement with the EU it would be able to compensate for it by deepening ties with one of the world's largest economies.¹⁰ On the other hand, some commentators suggested that European political leaders might punish the UK in order to send a signal that the EU would not tolerate the kind of populist and illiberal politics that both Trump and Brexit represented.¹¹ The instability Trump epitomised was certainly a cause for concern in Europe. The EU called an emergency meeting to coordinate its response to the U.S. election, especially in light of Trump's questioning of the American commitment to European security through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and his determination to seek a closer partnership with Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹² Thus, if U.S.-UK relations had a significant bearing on Brexit, Trump's election pulled in two directions. It had the potential to reduce the economic damage of Brexit through a trade deal and to make the exit negotiations harder by changing the strategic calculus for the EU.

Historically the U.S. has tried to influence the UK's policies towards the EU and its predecessor organisations, so it is not unusual that there would be speculation about the implications of Trump's election for Brexit. In the 1950s and 1960s, successive American administrations advocated for the UK to join the European Economic Community (EEC). As James Ellison points out, during the period when UK Prime Minister Harold Wilson contemplated the military withdrawal from East of Suez, which represented a major rupture in Anglo-American relations, one of the few areas of agreement between Wilson and U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson was the decision to embark on a second application for EEC membership.¹³ That application failed, but by the 1970s it had been revived and successfully negotiated by Edward Heath's Conservative government. President Richard Nixon's administration was initially concerned about the UK's accession due to the competition the U.S. would face from the Community, which, with the entry of the UK, Denmark, and Ireland had become the world's largest economic bloc in terms of population. However, by 1974 the administration concluded that the UK was an important partner that could help the U.S. to influence the European Community (EC) from the inside, a return to what had been American policy for over a decade.¹⁴

Of course, an interest in the outcome does not necessarily equate to having the power to change it. There is considerable debate about how much weight to place on the role of Anglo-American relations in prompting the UK's first application for EEC membership in 1961,

⁸ Carole Cadwalladr, "The Great British Brexit Robbery: How Our Democracy Was Hijacked," *The Guardian*, May 7, 2017.

⁹ Sam Levin, "Donald Trump Backs Brexit, Saying UK Would Be 'Better Off' without EU," *The Guardian*, May 6, 2016.

¹⁰ Siobhan Hughes, "Republicans Push for a Trade Deal with U.K.," *Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2016.

¹¹ Talking Politics Podcast, "Brexit after Trump," November 23, 2016.

¹² Duncan Robinson, "Britain and France Snub EU's Emergency Trump Meeting," *Financial Times*, November 13, 2016.

¹³ James Ellison, *The United States, Britain and the Transatlantic Crisis: Rising to the Gaullist Challenge, 1963–68* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), chapter 5.

¹⁴ Luke Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), chapter 5.

and over the role of the U.S. in its demise two years later at the hands of French President Charles de Gaulle. Historians have questioned whether Prime Minister Harold Macmillan submitted the application in order to appease the Americans, especially in the wake of the Suez Crisis, or if the decision represented a genuine change in British policy.¹⁵ After all, Macmillan's government had to come to terms with the uncomfortable realities of decolonisation and waning British influence in world affairs. As the scholarly literature on the UK's departure from the EU develops, similar questions may arise over the extent of Trump's influence, and that of Anglo-American relations more generally, over the Brexit process. When it comes time to place those debates in a wider historical context it will be important to remember two things. First, the EU of today is a much stronger international player than the EEC/EC of the 1960s and 1970s and therefore was more able to temper any unwanted American influence on the course of the Brexit negotiations. Second, Brexit is an order of magnitude larger than any previous disruption to UK-EU relations and thus comparisons to previous moments when the U.S. tried to influence UK policy towards the EU should be drawn with some caution.

The shockwaves caused by Brexit have given rise to another question: Can the so-called special relationship survive the UK's departure from the EU? On the one hand, there are those who argue that Brexit will make the UK a less appealing partner for the U.S. because leaving the EU will weaken the UK in terms of material resources and soft power influence.¹⁶ On the other hand, Steve Marsh argues that the debate about whether or not Brexit threatens the Anglo-American relationship is "misplaced." He points out that the UK's influence in the EU is not the driving force behind the special nature of Anglo-American relations.¹⁷ Marsh makes an important point. The UK's membership in the EC was important for the Anglo-American relationship during the Cold War insofar as British governments made themselves more valuable to the U.S. via the offer of influence in Brussels and other Community capitals. Although prime ministers John Major and Tony Blair both tried to maintain that role in the period after the end of the Cold War, it diminished in significance and the U.S. developed key bilateral relationships with the EU's member states and the European Commission without using the UK as an intermediary. If the UK's utility to the U.S. is to be found in its ability to support American interests in the EU, Washington's view of the importance of that role had started to wane before 2016. Although the UK's departure from the EU will sever any remaining vestiges of it, on that basis Brexit will not drastically alter the nature of Anglo-American relations.

Nevertheless, the health of relations between London and Washington has fluctuated considerably since Brexit, especially in terms of the rapport between the president and prime minister. Under Trump's leadership, relations were influenced less by Brexit itself than by the president's temper and his personal view of the occupant of No.10 Downing Street. By 2017 it was obvious that Prime Minister Theresa May and Trump would not find it easy to work together, not least because her 'Global Britain' rhetoric pulled in the opposite direction of one of the key messages of his presidency: 'American First.' Trump's unpopularity in the UK was a liability for the prime minister, as was the two leaders' lack of personal chemistry. To make matters worse, he publicly condemned May's approach to negotiating the UK's exit from the EU. In an interview with the *Sun*, Trump claimed that her Brexit plan, which had been agreed at Chequers in July 2018, might undermine any possibility of a free trade deal with the United States.¹⁸ Furthermore, Trump made no secret of his preference for Boris Johnson, a key rival to May who succeeded her in 2019. As Martin Farr argues, the Trump-May relationship was a true low-point.¹⁹

Even before Johnson became prime minister, it seemed as though his entry into Downing Street might hasten a recovery of the Anglo-American relationship. In an odd turn of events, the improvement began with a controversy over leaked memos in which Sir Kim Darroch, the UK's Ambassador to the U.S., criticised Donald Trump. Prime Minister Theresa May backed Darroch, but Johnson, who was at the time fighting the Conservative Party's leadership contest, openly disapproved of him staying in the post. Between Johnson's lack of support and headlines in the UK claiming that the ambassador was a "crazed Europhile and therefore the wrong person to be

¹⁵ For a discussion of these debates see Nigel Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War: The Irony of Interdependence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 130-132.

¹⁶ Wilson, "Brexit, Trump and the Special Relationship."

¹⁷ Steve Marsh, "The US, BREXIT, and Anglo-American Relations," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 16:3 (2018): 272-292.

¹⁸ Tom Newton Dunn, "Trump's Brexit Blast," *Sun*, July 13, 2018.

¹⁹ Martin Farr, "Donald Trump and Theresa May: The Incredible Relationship," in Michael Patrick Cullinane and Martin Farr, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Presidents and Prime Ministers from Cleveland and Salisbury to Trump and Johnson* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2021).

representing modern Britain” as it navigated the post-Brexit world, his position became untenable.²⁰ Within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office the episode was a worrying indication of the future of British diplomacy, which raised important questions about the ability of ambassadors and civil servants to provide frank and honest advice.²¹ Yet for Johnson, the scandal was an early opportunity to signal his support for the president and it appeared that the soon-to-be occupant of No.10 would place a high priority on maintaining good relations with the United States, even at the expense of relations with the Civil Service. The tactic worked, and, with Darroch gone, Trump praised Johnson as “Britain Trump [sic]” and the “right man” to deliver Brexit.²² There was agreement in other areas too. At first Johnson appeared to part ways with Trump over policy towards China, but the eventual reversal of the prime minister’s decision to have Huawei provide the UK’s 5G network was praised by the U.S. administration.²³

Although the personal affinity between the two leaders was helpful for rebuilding Anglo-American relations after the nadir of the Trump-May years, there was little in the way of serious help for the UK after Brexit. The idea of a U.S.-UK trade deal remained just that, an idea, and as the 2020 presidential election campaign began, it became clear that any deal would have to pass an American Congress which was increasingly concerned about the implications of Brexit for Ireland. The emergence of an Anglo-American trade deal would have been a sign of the strength of the relationship. In his first post-election interview in the UK, Trump told Michael Gove, one of May’s Cabinet ministers and a prominent campaigner for a Leave vote, that he would press ahead with a trade deal “very quickly. I’m a big fan of the UK. We’re gonna work very hard to get it done quickly and done properly.”²⁴ At the time of writing, the only post-Brexit non-European trade deal the British government has signed is the UK-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement. The Johnson government’s next priority is to launch negotiations with the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand, and it has applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).²⁵ A deal with the U.S. remains an important goal for Johnson. The most recent government publication on this subject suggests that the value of a U.S.-UK Free Trade Agreement would be an increase to UK Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 0.07%–0.16% or £1.6–£3.4 billion.²⁶ Yet, after five rounds of talks conducted during the Trump presidency, there is no sign that the new U.S. administration, led by President Joe Biden, is interested in seeing the negotiations continue. The necessary permission for the U.S. executive to ‘fast track’ a trade deal, granted by the Trade Promotion Authority, expired in July 2021.²⁷

There are other processes at work that make it difficult to fully assess the effects of the UK’s decision to leave the EU on Anglo-American relations. The impact of Brexit on Ireland is something to which the Biden administration is paying close attention. It remains to be seen whether the operation of the border in the Irish Sea will further inflame tensions in Ireland. If the events of early 2021, such as the protests when supermarket supplies were disrupted after Brexit, are any indication, this is a major cause for concern.²⁸ Another is the ways in which Brexit might undermine the constitutional integrity of the UK. Nicola Sturgeon was re-elected as Scotland’s First Minister in

²⁰ Kim Darroch, *Collateral Damage, Britain, America and Europe in the Age of Trump* (London: HarperCollins, 2020), details of Darroch’s resignation are in chapters 1 and 16, quotation on 261-262.

²¹ “Kim Darroch: Effectively Sacked by Johnson on the Orders of Trump,” *The Guardian*, July 10, 2019.

²² BBC News, August 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-49464268>; and BBC News, July 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-us-canada-49090804>.

²³ Martin Farr, “Donald Trump and Boris Johnson: the Unfulfilled Relationship,” in Cullinane and Farr, eds., *Presidents and Prime Ministers*.

²⁴ Donald Trump as quoted in Heather Stewart, Alan Yuhas and Peter Walker, “Donald Trump’s First UK Post-Election Interview: Brexit a ‘Great Thing’,” *The Guardian*, January 16, 2017.

²⁵ For details on the CPTPP see Institute for Government, “Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP),” <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/trade-cptpp>.

²⁶ Department for International Trade, “UK-US Free Trade Agreement,” March 2 2020, 83, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uks-approach-to-trade-negotiations-with-the-us>.

²⁷ James Kane, “What Does a Biden Presidency Mean for Trade?,” Institute for Government, November 11, 2020, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/us-election-trade-implications>.

²⁸ “Brexit Faces Problems at the Northern Irish Border,” *Economist* (June 19, 2021).

May 2021 and promised to hold a second referendum on Scottish independence. The case for doing so, according to the Scottish National Party, rests on the fact that the United Kingdom Scotland voted to remain part of in 2014 is fundamentally different to the post-2016 union.²⁹ Finally, the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy priorities remain unclear, and it is difficult at times to disentangle the government's actions in the international arena from the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Is the decision to cut the international aid budget truly a short-term reaction to the economic impact of COVID-19, or does it reflect the priorities of a government that is withdrawing from or redefining its previous international role?

Given the level of uncertainty, what can be said about the influence of “Mr Brexit” on the UK's departure from the EU? There are a multitude of connections between the UK's referendum and the U.S. presidential election in 2016, from the personalities and themes in the campaigns, to the wave of populism and instability that both represent. Despite these connections, we should not assume that one outcome will have an overriding influence on the other. Historically, the fact that an American president wanted to sway the course of UK-EC/EU relations has not necessarily manifested in the ability to do so. We should also be careful about drawing parallels to other moments when Anglo-American relations have intersected with those between the UK and its partners in Europe. Due to the size of the disruption caused by the 2016 EU Referendum, it is very difficult to draw comparisons between Brexit and other major points of rupture in the UK's relationship with the European integration project. Although Anglo-American relations have fluctuated considerably between 2016 and 2021, that may simply be the result of the fact that the U.S. was led by a temperamental president for whom, in the words of Kathleen Burk, “the personal is the political.”³⁰ Complete answers to questions about the implications of the Trump presidency for Brexit will have to wait until the full consequences of Brexit are established.

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²⁹ “Scotland's Future,” SNP Manifesto, May 2021, 11, https://issuu.com/hinksbrandwise/docs/04_15_snp_manifesto_2021_a4_document?mode=window.

³⁰ Kathleen Burk, “U.S.-UK Relations in the Time of Trump,” H-Diplo and ISSF Policy Series, America and the World – The Effects of the Trump Presidency, March 23, 2021, https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/7449651/issf-policy-series-2021-15-us-uk-relations-time-trump#_ftn1.