

Special Relationship Tested

By [Des Brown](#)

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On Thursday, the British Parliament voted against supporting U.S. military intervention in Syria by 285 votes to 272. It was quite a narrow defeat, but it could be depicted as either a personal defeat for Prime Minister David Cameron or a great day for the legitimacy of British parliamentary democracy.

Who is the most accurate? A sorrowful Paddy Ashdown, former leader of Britain's third party, said on BBC radio that the only people who would be cheering this morning would be Syrian President Bashar Assad and President Vladimir Putin.

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Perhaps Labour Party leader Ed Miliband was more accurate when he said to the BBC: "I think this vote sends out a message to the world that Britain has learned the lessons of its past, it's learned the lessons of Iraq. There are times when we contemplate military action — and we're right to do so — but if we're ever to undertake military action, we'll do so in the right way."

But what about the long term effects on British politics? Some of Cameron's critics on the right have lost no time in using the opportunity to berate the prime minister, which is exactly what some of his more restless backbencher members of parliament did Thursday.

But the country at large is more likely to breathe a sigh of relief. Intervention in the Middle East has never been good for Britain. Think of the Suez Canal crisis in 1956 and Iraq in 2003. Yet neither of those invasions had any impact on the subsequent general elections results. The governing Conservative Party returned with a 100-strong majority in 1959, and the governing Labour Party returned in the 2005 election with a 66-seat majority.

The often-quoted remark of U.S. Secretary of State Robert McNamara in 1962 that Britain had lost an empire but not yet found a role could scarcely be less relevant today. Britain has spent the past 50 years doing nothing but developing other roles: as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, in the European Union, NATO, the Commonwealth, the Group of Eight and the G20. Britain's decision affects none of these, but there may be implications for the relationship with Washington. "The rejection additionally signaled what analysts called the biggest rupture in the U.S.-British 'special relationship' since the 1982 Falklands war," The Washington Post wrote Friday.

It's the latest installment in the long history of "the special relationship." That's why there's a statue of Winston Churchill standing outside the British Embassy in Washington. Churchill was the original exponent of the Atlantic Alliance, forged in World War II with U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Fast-forward 70 years. U.S. President Obama's visit to London in May 2011 included an address to both houses of Parliament in which he stated: "I've come here today to reaffirm one of the oldest, one of the strongest alliances the world has ever known."

British leaders are often criticized for being too closely tied to the U.S., but the relationship is an essential one. There is a subtext to the relationship as well. For a British prime minister, it's always a pleasure to escape the storm of domestic difficulties — recession, rebellious backbenchers and a hostile media — for the kudos of a photo opportunity on the White House lawn and the overwhelming glamour of the U.S. political landscape with its billion-dollar election campaigns and inaugurations.

This is how Tony Blair must have felt in July 2003 when he delivered his sermon-on-the-mount speech to a joint session of Congress on Capitol Hill. He got 17 standing ovations and for a good reason: He fully backed their decision to invade Iraq and praised U.S. values. Had Blair put "my fellow Americans" at the beginning of the speech, it could have been a presidential candidate addressing the nominating convention. The British view of Blair was so negative that few saw what a tremendous honor this was, one bestowed on few foreign

leaders.

It is unlikely that the current British position will inflict any long-term damage on that relationship, although it does raise the question of how effective nonintervention is. The administration of former U.S. President Bill Clinton did adopt a largely noninterventionist policy following the Black Hawk Down incident in Somalia in 1993. It ended on Sept. 11, 2001.

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