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British Association for American Studies - Written evidence (FRU0013)

We are pleased to offer this evidence on behalf of the British Association for American Studies and its publication the *Journal of American Studies*. It addresses the following areas of interest: the nature and history of the special relationship (1 and 1a); its current state (2); and future opportunities and frictions (5), the latter two in relation to research and higher education.

Founded in 1955, the British Association for American Studies (BAAS) is one of Europe's leading scholarly organisations for the interdisciplinary study of the United States. BAAS promotes, supports and encourages the study of the US in the UK through conferences, publications, awards, research and pedagogy support, and schools outreach. Its members are academics and postgraduate students, with expertise ranging chronologically from pre-colonial North America to the contemporary United States, and across art, economics, film, history, literature, media, music, sociology and politics.

Published continuously since 1966 and currently published by Cambridge University Press, the *Journal of American Studies* (JAS) is a peer-reviewed journal. JAS publishes scholarship from all over the world on American literature, history, institutions, politics, economics, film, popular culture, geography and related subjects in domestic, continental, hemispheric, and global contexts. JAS is BAAS's flagship publication, but it maintains editorial independence.

We make this submission of evidence for the following reasons:

- BAAS, and American Studies as a field, are products of the special relationship. But more importantly, the interdisciplinary lens of American Studies allows an understanding of the ways in which contemporary issues in US politics and culture emerge from deeply embedded hierarchies of race, class, and gender and enduring debates over the origins, identity, purpose, and future of the United States, both of which emerge within internal regional and national contexts, but also in hemispheric, transnational and global contexts. The research and scholarship produced in American Studies in the UK is essential to shaping the future of the UK's relationship with the US. But it is also under considerable threat from shrinkage in the higher education sector, a lack of investment in humanities research, and the policies of the new Trump administration, which are hostile to the field's priorities and methods, and dismissive of its findings.
- The executive committee and members of BAAS and the editors and board members of JAS are experts in US history, politics, and culture, who are well-placed to comment on the historic development of the special relationship.
- Both organisations see close and productive relations between the UK and US as crucial for: a) researching and teaching on the US from the UK, b) establishing research and pedagogical collaborations between UK and US scholars in all disciplines, and c) continuing the higher educational exchanges that underpinned the special relationship in the twentieth century.

- These relations **must** emerge from shared beliefs in the value of strong democratic institutions and the rule of law, and from joint efforts to reduce structural inequalities and increase opportunities for all.
- Our relationship with the US and its institutions must not involve compromising the above values. Historically, the special relationship evolved and deepened through the UK functioning as a critical friend to the US, and being a space from which Americans who sought to make their nation more democratic could voice their dissent.

We appreciate the Lords undertaking this inquiry at a moment when the special relationship is under considerable strain and hope that this evidence will be of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

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Dr Katie McGettigan (Senior Lecturer in American Literature, Royal Holloway University of London),
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13 March 2025

Evidence Submission: The UK's Future Relationship with the US

A. SUMMARY

1. Close transatlantic political, diplomatic, defence and intelligence ties historically rested upon a shared literary and popular culture, reform networks, educational exchanges, and intellectual collaboration. The US-UK special relationship has proved resilient and flexible because the UK has been a critical friend to the US, supporting Americans who challenged their nation to achieve its promises of freedom and equality for all. Extra-governmental initiatives, often linked to education, solidified a sense of shared values between the nations. The Trump administration's attacks on academic freedom, attempts to dismantle government institutions, and anti-DEI agenda threaten these ties, as shown by the termination of a US Embassy-funded grants programme that BAAS administered.

B. PRE-HISTORIES OF THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP: US-UK RELATIONS, 1776-1914 (AOI 1a)

2. The cultural, social, and affective ties that underpin the political special relationship of the twentieth-century were forged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In these early US-UK relations, a shared culture and alliances around progressive values created close affinities, despite sustained political and diplomatic tensions.
3. The US's political independence (declared 1776; codified 1783) did not sever cultural ties between the nations. American literature emerged from US authors' participation in a transatlantic literary culture, rather than from their opposition to Britain (Giles, 2001, 2002). Early American star authors Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper achieved US fame via their popularity in Britain (Rezek, 2015), while British publishers constructed "American literature" as a distinct, valuable and national tradition through editions of works by Herman Melville, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Ralph Waldo Emerson (McGettigan, 2023). Mid-nineteenth century America and its citizens sought to understand their pasts, flourish in the present, and anticipate their futures via Britain and its cultural productions (Hanlon, 2015; Tamarkin, 2008).
4. In the mid-nineteenth century, Britain offered American abolitionists economic and moral support. Black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and William and Ellen Craft travelled to Britain to escape persecution and publicize their cause through lecturing and publishing (Murray, 2020). If Black Americans were sometimes frustrated by British reformers' patronizing attitudes and lack of action (Sweeney, 2022), they also found political and intellectual freedom in Britain (Sweeney, 2007; Wright 2017). This support for abolitionism was unpopular amongst statesmen in the South (states in which slavery was legal), but also among some Northerners, who saw it as unjustified interference in domestic matters.

5. During the US Civil War, Britain weathered economic brinksmanship to remain neutral. In an attempt to force Britain to recognise it, the Confederacy blocked exports of cotton, which badly damaged the textile trade, leading to the Lancashire Cotton Famine. Textile workers' steadfastness in the face of economic hardship was recognised by US President Abraham Lincoln.
 6. The Civil War also saw US-UK tensions over Union interference with British shipping (most notably the Trent Affair, 1861) and over British companies supplying ships to the Confederacy; these continued until 1872. As such, the period immediately following the War saw political and diplomatic relations cool. US attention to post Civil War Reconstruction and industrial development fuelled political isolationism, while British attention focussed on its Empire.
 7. Nevertheless, the two nations remained culturally entangled with one another. As in the earlier nineteenth-century, transatlantic alliances emerged from reform movements: women's rights, anti-poverty campaigners, socialist groups (Jacob and Kessler 2021; Nolan 2012). In popular culture, British audiences eagerly consumed Wild West shows and American fiction. The turn of the twentieth century witnessed a flourishing culture of intellectual collaboration, including exchanges of academic staff, which provided Britain with the opportunity to challenge Germany as Europe's academic superpower in the wake of World War I (Irish 2015).
 8. As the US grew in economic strength and global influence, overtaking Britain as the world's largest economy by the end of the century, the two nations reached a rapprochement in the 1890s. This was capped by the US entry into World War One in support of the Allies.
 9. It should not be forgotten that the Anglo-American closeness described above was often routed through a shared investment in white Anglo-Saxon supremacy, justified by scientific racism. If the special relationship enabled dissent against racialized violence in slavery, then it also fuelled a pernicious ethnonationalism that was used to justify the oppression of indigenous and non-white populations in the US, extractive uses of land and people and racialized violence in the British Empire, and America's new imperial possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific. Trump's actions against diversity, equality and inclusion initiatives, and promises to deport immigrants and to make English America's first language are indicative of just such an ethnonationalism openly returning to US government.
- D. THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP POST-WORLD WAR 1: ALLIANCES VIA CULTURE, POLITICAL VALUES, EDUCATION, AND RESEARCH (AOI 1a)**
10. After World War One, the internationalist vision of US President Woodrow Wilson, which emphasised co-operation with Britain and Europe, faltered and gave way to a relative isolationism during the Great Depression and economic crises of the 1930s.

11. The US-UK military alliance during World War Two consolidated existing relations and cemented the special relationship in a form which lasts to the present day. Military cooperation, particularly in Western Europe, was accompanied by close intelligence sharing, establishing foundations which continued to underpin the US-UK alliance through the Cold War. The UK was the largest beneficiary of the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan), receiving over \$13bn in economic aid between 1948 and 1951. This act underpinned significant subsequent economic growth for both countries. After World War Two, military and intelligence cooperation, enabled in part through the establishment of NATO in 1949, was accompanied by increasingly close educational, scientific and cultural ties.

12. The UK was a particular beneficiary of the cultural diplomacy programmes established across the world by the US in the immediate post-war period. Emblematic of these is the establishment in 1948 of the US-UK Fulbright Commission, enabling scholarly exchange between the two countries for teaching and research across all disciplines. The Commission remains active today, retaining its focus on responding to global challenges of injustice and inequality.
 - 12.1. Notable UK Fulbright scholars who benefitted from exchange with the US include one recent prime minister (Rishi Sunak); and five Nobel Laureates in the sciences from the last 20 years.
 - 12.2. Notable US Fulbright scholars who benefitted from exchange with the UK include nine Nobel Laureates; twenty Pulitzer Prize winners; Merze Tate (the first Black woman to attend the University of Oxford).
 - 12.3. The significance of educational exchange between the US and the UK is also evidenced by the many prominent US recipients of the Rhodes Scholarship that allow scholars from the former British Empire to undertake postgraduate study at Oxford University. These include Eugene Booth (key scientist in the Manhattan Project (see 14, below)); Wesley Clark (NATO Supreme Commander, 1997-2000); Bill Clinton (President, 1993-2001); Dean Rusk (Secretary of State, 1961-1969).
 - 12.4. The establishment of American Studies as a discipline in UK Universities, and the founding of BAAS, should be understood as part of this public diplomacy programme focused on education and scholarship enacted in the immediate post-World War Two years. The UK American Studies community and BAAS and have in turn nourished the special relationship on cultural and educational grounds ever since, as critical friends of the United States.

13. Research collaboration between the US and the UK since World War Two has been particularly significant in the development of nuclear technologies. This partnership was inaugurated by the Manhattan Project of nuclear research (1942-1946), involving the US, UK and Canada and directed by the US physicist Robert Oppenheimer, himself a beneficiary of US-UK educational exchange, having studied at Cambridge University from 1922-1926. After a hiatus, the US-UK programme of scientific cooperation on nuclear research was reestablished by the 1958 UK-US Mutual Defense Agreement, which enables the exchange of nuclear technologies, materials and information up to the present day. The treaty was extended indefinitely in November 2024.

14. Public support in the UK for the special relationship during the post-World War Two era was underpinned both by a common understanding of mutual defence and economic interests on the one hand, but also by pervasive cultural exchange on the other. In particular, the period saw extensive representation and availability of US life and values in the UK through the Hollywood film industry, which dominated the domestic market for popular cinema and played an important part in driving the growth of celebrity and consumer culture. An influential medium of mutual exchange from the 1960s onwards was popular music, where British artists shaped by American musical traditions successfully accessed US markets, influenced views of Britain from the US, and helped consolidate a sense of shared cultural identity (Kroes, 1996).
15. In this period both countries attempted to distance themselves from histories of transatlantic slavery, racial domination and empire, for example by the Civil Rights Act (1964) that ended *de jure* racial segregation in the United States, and by Britain's withdrawal from key colonial possessions such as India (1947), Jamaica (1962), and Kenya (1963). British American Studies scholars have led comparative study of these historical trajectories, evaluating the ways the US and UK have navigated their intertwined transatlantic histories (Giles 2002; Gilroy 1993).
16. Above all, the US-UK special relationship in this era was founded on a shared stance of anti-Communism in both foreign and domestic policy, and a common enemy: the Soviet Union. Its collapse in 1989 and the end of the Cold War thus removed one of the key factors in the special relationship, even while shared cultural, political and economic territory remained. Following the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, the UK remained a key ally for the US in military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, but arguably the ideological glue binding the special relationship in its strongest phase – its stance of liberal anti-Communism – was no longer as strong as during the Cold War era.
17. In the post-World War Two era the special relationship was characterized by a liberal consensus orientated by a perceived set of shared values: free markets, individual freedoms and the rule of law. All three of these values are now being openly challenged by the new Trump administration, which differentiates the current transatlantic political landscape considerably from its post-World War Two guise.

D. THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S IMPACT ON RESEARCH COLLABORATION: A CASE STUDY (AOI 2)

18. BAAS has long worked closely with the US Embassy London and representatives of the State Department. In the early 1950s, as part of Cold War diplomatic efforts, the United States Education Commission and the Rockefeller Foundation funded a series of conferences on American Studies. BAAS was founded in 1955 as a result of these conferences. The State Department hoped that by funding BAAS, the organisation would act as a propaganda arm of

the US government, disseminating information about the United States and maintaining a positive image of the US amongst the British public. BAAS committee members, however, rejected funding that would undermine their intellectual autonomy, and instead applied for funds from the Rockefeller Foundation and Fulbright Commission.

19. From 2016 to 2025, BAAS worked closely with colleagues at the US Embassy London to run a small grants programme that sought to 'promote a better understanding of the United States through American Studies.' BAAS administered over \$500,000 in small awards between 2016 and 2023, with events and activities reaching tens of thousands of participants. A shared priority of both BAAS and the US Embassy London was to reach a diverse range of audiences, including children, young people, and underserved and disadvantaged communities across the UK.
20. In 2024 BAAS was awarded further funding of £200,000 for a grants programme to run from 2024-2026. However, this grant was terminated in January 2025 because it did not align with the Trump administration's priorities, most notably an Executive Order that sought to outlaw federal funding for programmes that included provisions for diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Executive Committee's statement on the termination of the programme, in which we reaffirm our commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion, as well as our scholarly autonomy, can be found at: <https://baas.ac.uk/funding/baas-us-embassy-small-grants-programme/>.
21. BAAS is aware that the State Department will likely seek alternative avenues to promote the United States in the UK. However, without the involvement of the American Studies community of scholars, these efforts will lack scholarly rigour and will serve as propaganda for the Trump administration. At worst, such propaganda would undermine the understanding of the United States in Britain and could potentially have long-term effects on education and research, both in schools and in higher education.

E. THE STATE OF AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE UK (AOI 2 AND 5)

22. At a time when unpredictable U.S. leadership and shifting alliances threaten to reshape global politics, studying and understanding the United States – through its politics, history, culture, and peoples – has never been more important. British American Studies scholars are at the forefront of this scholarship and education; their ability to situate the US in interdisciplinary global contexts is sought after by academics and institutions in the United States and the rest of the world.
23. However, American Studies faces a number of challenges in UK higher education. Undergraduate American Studies degree programmes are closing or being reduced in scale as part of the broader crisis in the Arts and Humanities, and there is no American Studies A-Level. The visibility of American Studies in universities is decreasing, meaning that promising students sometimes struggle to find the field, even as undergraduate students on other

degree programmes (e.g. History, Politics and International Relations, English Literature, Media Studies) remain highly interested in US topics.

24. UK undergraduate students are often keen to take up international opportunities, continuing the history of academic exchange described in section D. The US remains one of the most popular study abroad destinations not only for students taking American Studies degrees but far more broadly, largely as a result of the strength and depth of the special relationship. International scholarly exchanges remain a vital way for both young people and scholars to learn about the United States.
25. UK-based American Studies scholars also regularly visit the United States to engage in research development, including presenting their work at conferences, and to visit archives. The ability to conduct autonomous scholarly research in the United States is vital to our discipline and to the strength of scholarship on the US in the UK.
26. BAAS is concerned that the US will become a less favourable destination for UK students and scholars as a result of Trump administration policies. Restrictions on academic freedom will make it less likely that scholars are willing to conduct research about, or in, the US. An administration hostile to diversity, equity and inclusion will make the US inhospitable for students of colour and LGBTQ+ students, who may choose not to take up international opportunities as a result, thus harming UK HE's efforts at widening participation. BAAS members are concerned that the Trump administration may place restrictions on visas, thus denying access to the US at all for some UK-based scholars.
27. In sum, BAAS is concerned that Trump administration policies will prevent the production and dissemination of world-leading research and the development of new and existing scholarly communities. Such stymieing of the production and transfer of knowledge will have ongoing ramifications not only for the study of the US in Britain but for the equally necessary project of understanding Britain's place in the global currents of history and culture that continue to shape the nation today.

13 March 2025

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