

The Diary: Amanda Foreman

By Amanda Foreman

Published: October 30 2010 01:44 | Last updated: October 30 2010 01:44

Ten years ago, I went to New York on a research trip to look at some papers of British volunteers who fought in the American civil war. Instead of coming home after two weeks, I married a businessman and had five children.

During that decade, I have watched the “special relationship” between America and Britain slide from the hot love manifested between Tony Blair and George W Bush, to the distinct chill that exists today.

We Brits tend to blow hot and cold towards the US anyway, but I don’t think any prime minister would – say – celebrate his first day in office by returning a bust of John F Kennedy to the US embassy. A Washington insider recently confessed to me that President Obama’s decision to rid the White House of Winston Churchill is now regarded as colossal misstep – “he could have just moved the statue to another room – even the powder room”. Anything, it is claimed, would have been better than the apparent announcement that the Anglo-American military alliance is a dead letter.

Because now, two years later, the message that the US doesn’t need the UK as military partner has come back to bite Washington where it hurts and the administration is having to back-pedal.

In London last week I went to hear The Spectator magazine’s defence debate. The motion proposed combining the army, navy and air force into one massive marine corps. On any other day during the last 1,000 years such a motion would have been treated as a joke. But on this occasion, not only was it debated seriously (by heavyweights including Brigadier Allan Mallinson, Adam Holloway MP and General Sir Richard Dannatt) but one-third of the room voted in favour.

The next day, I took part in the special hour-long BBC2 *Newsnight* discussion on the government’s comprehensive spending review. Amazingly, the possibility of Britain becoming a “third-rate power” after the **defence cuts** was discussed in the same calm tone that one might use when talking of the long-expected death of an old horse. I find it shocking that in only 20 years defence spending has shrunk from 4 per cent of GDP to 2.6 per cent.

There are frightening parallels with the Geddes Axe in 1922 – the British government’s postwar retrenchment – which cut defence by 40 per cent and led to the policy of appeasement with Nazi Germany. It seems desperately short-sighted to me to frame the defence debate around whether Britain is punching above its weight when the threat from Iran, and its nuclear ambition, is growing.

Back in New York to see the family, I catch a sneak preview of Tom Hooper’s film *The King’s Speech*. It received a standing ovation at the Telluride Film Festival and won the People’s Choice award at the Toronto Film Festival. Colin Firth plays George VI struggling to overcome his stammer: hardly the kind of subject matter to grab Americans. Yet the already rapturous reception indicates the film is certain to become the next *The Queen*, which was a cult hit in the US. What this says about the “special relationship” makes me uneasy, however. It is all history to the Americans – as in – no longer alive.

If Americans cared more about history, this wouldn’t be a problem. I spent the weekend in upstate New York where I attended the Film Columbia Festival, in Chatham. Headlining the event was a noir-ish second world war movie called *Christina*, starring Stephen Lang (Col Miles Quaritch in *Avatar*). The film is suspenseful and well-acted, but for me the really interesting thing about Stephen Lang is that he is passionate about preserving civil war battlefields.

He is one of the leading defenders in the fight to preserve the sanctity of the Gettysburg battlefield in Pennsylvania.

The Battle of Gettysburg on July 1-3 1863, is venerated in the US as the turning point in the civil war. For the previous two years, the Confederates had appeared to have the momentum and all the best generals. The Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania was an attempt by General Robert E Lee to end the war once and for all. It was a gamble for which the south paid dearly. There was no chance of European recognition of southern independence after the Federal victory at Gettysburg. The total number of casualties – 50,000 – was the largest of any civil war battle. The reason that president Abraham Lincoln visited Gettysburg to deliver his famous address was to mark the opening of its war cemetery.

And now, one of the holiest of American shrines is being destroyed by developers. So far, the Civil War Preservation Trust has raised enough funds to buy 698 acres, and is appealing for donations to buy another five. But it is not only the core battleground that is in peril. The immediate surrounding area is at risk from a casino at one end, and a giant Walmart at the other. Which is Sodom and which is Gomorrah, who can tell? This would be funny if it weren’t so terrible.

I would like to think nothing so hideous and destructive would happen in England. But when I fly back to London, I read in the papers that the medieval village of Dunster in Somerset is about to be disembowelled by the local council.

Dunster is famous for being one of the – if not *the* – most perfectly preserved village in the country. Its ancient cobblestones have survived hundreds of years of wear, until now. In the interests of health and safety, the cobbles are almost certainly going to be replaced with cement. If it happens, we will lose a profound and irreplaceable connection to our medieval past, for the sake of a few thousand pounds of potential litigation by some unwary pedestrian.

So mindless destruction is everywhere – destruction of our defence capabilities, our long-term alliances, our collective memory and our identity. If someone with the power of Hillary Clinton can't stop our aircraft carriers from being turned into massive floating sculptures, then ordinary people certainly can't. For all I know, Britain will become so weak that it will declare itself a neutral country like Switzerland, and give up fighting altogether.

But in the case of Dunster, at least, maybe there is an answer. Rather than throw the cobbles away, why not ask the public to sponsor them. Hold a "click for bricks" campaign on the internet. Then the money raised could go into a preservation trust to be used for repairs.

Relationships – special or otherwise – come and go, but stones are forever. Let's keep it that way.

'A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided' (Allen Lane, £30), by Amanda Foreman is published on November 4

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