

“The Relevance of Magna Carta in the 21st Century”
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c. 1,500 words

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Sir Robert Worcester¹

Introduction

Good evening. I'm delighted to be here to speak at Worcester Cathedral for many reasons, at Worcester where I came on my first visit to my ancestral home 58 years ago. Second, to pay tribute to Magna Carta, for I have revered Magna Carta for nearly 75 years. Third, to pay tribute to the contribution made by King John 800 years ago next month, for without being 'Bad King John', would there be a rule of law, or would we still be ruled by the economic and political power of kings, emperors and potentates, clerics and mullahs, military dictators and those who by force rather than reason and voice as we are today.

There are three parts to my talk:

1. First, **‘Why me, why here? Why now?’**
2. Second, **Why commemorate the 800th anniversary of the sealing of the Charter of the Barons in 1215, later, in 1217, called Magna Carta.**
3. and to conclude my remarks, **what's Magna Carta got to do with the Special Relationship, as you can tell by me accent, I didn't start as Englishman?**

Why me, why now?

I can't remember when I first knew that I was English. When does a child remember he has a 'last name', a 'family' name, as everyone today has? I knew I was called Bobby when I was three, probably before, but I didn't know I suspect that my last name was Worcester.

But decades later I found that at three, I had an ambition...

Growing up in America I had a pretty thorough schooling in English history, English literature and not least English cinema (that was before television), which began with the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, then 1066 and all that, in 1215, the Charter of the Barons which two years later became The Great Charter, *Magna Carta*.

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I grew up with the belief that 'the sun never sets on the British Empire'. And did I collect stamps from all over the British Empire! And I'm going to renew my acquaintance with stamp collecting next Tuesday, on the 2nd of June, when the Royal Mail's first-day Magna Carta covers are released to the world

All Americans knew then that George Washington, John and Sam Adams, John Jay, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, Benjamin Franklin, James Otis and nearly all the Founding Fathers were Englishmen (Alexander Hamilton was a Scot).

I first saw Magna Carta at the New York World's Fair at the British Exhibition where Lincoln's 1297 copy was displayed. I was then 7 years old.

On my first visit to Britain, in June 1957, yes, just a few months after joining the ESU, I was a serving officer in the US Army Corps of Engineers, trained at Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, returning to America to be discharged after serving in Korea, my tour of duty completed. On my first day in London I went straight after breakfast to the British Museum to see two things: Magna Carta and the Rosetta Stone. These, to me, represented the two icons of civilised society: the rule of law and communication outside the village.

On my arrival to this country in January 1969 with my late American wife and our two small boys, on our first weekend I took them to Runnymede, where we are today. What a lonely wet and windy meadow I found on that cold January day. A tea room, closed, just one another couple and a few singles visiting the iconic location where the Magna Carta was agreed, and the four of us. As we slogged through the wet grass (same as in January 2015, of course) up to the ABA Memorial where we stood in reverence for a few minutes while I explained to my 6 year old and 8 year old son what it meant, as my father had done for me 27 years earlier.

It was 23 years ago when I became Chairman of the Pilgrims Society, I found to my surprise that I'd become a Trustee of the Magna Carta Trust as the Chairman of the Pilgrims, by the '57 Charter, is *ex officio* a Trustee, as is the Master of the Rolls, head of the civil law in the United Kingdom, the Chairman of the Trust. I now serve as Deputy Chairman of the Trust. In 2009 I was asked to take on the responsibility for organising the 800th Anniversary Commemorations, world wide.

How could I refuse?

Why are you here this evening?

All of us here today must be pleased to have the advantage unavailable a century ago when the 700th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta wasn't commemorated in 1915 due to the War, other than in the excellent, but long out of print, Royal Historical Society produced book of Magna Carta Commemoration essays.

While the war on terrorism goes on today, it is a far cry from the depths of 1915, and reminds us that the link between the military and other security forces and Magna Carta is the defence of liberty and the rule of law, in democratic societies, not autocratic or ever royal dictatorships.

Magna Carta is England's greatest export.

Now affecting the lives of nearly two billion people in over 100 countries throughout the world, Magna Carta has for centuries influenced constitutional thinking worldwide including in many Commonwealth countries, even in France, Germany, and Japan, and throughout Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Over the past 800 years, denials of Magna Carta's basic principles have led to a loss of liberties, of human rights and even genocide taking place yesterday, this morning, today and tomorrow.

It is an exceptional document on which all democratic society has been constructed, described by the former German Ambassador when he said to me that everybody in Germany knows about the Magna Carta, it is "The Foundation of Democracy".

Thirty-eight years ago in all its splendour the House of Common's Speaker and House of Lords Lord Speaker, MPs and Peers, Law Lords, Ambassadors and High Commissioners, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, met with the senior members of the American Congress and Senate assembled in the 1,000 year old Palace of Westminster's Westminster Hall to hand over the Lincoln 1215 Magna Carta to the Library of Congress in the Autumn of 2014, to be displayed in the Rotunda of the Congress of the United States. I was there.

This time the plan is to have the Supreme Court organised 'mock trial' with judges, jury and advocates, mainly from Commonwealth countries, judging barons and bishops in the dock on the charge of treason, telecast and broadcast on BBC World.

This will be on 31 July, the night before the Supreme Court Magna Carta Exhibition opens for August and September. The British Library, starting in April and running through September will have the biggest exhibition it's ever held.

There will be coins and stamps, evensongs and commemorative services, exhibitions and demonstrations, pageants and concerts, sound and light shows, seminars and symposiums, open lectures and plays in the Magna Carta Towns in Cathedrals and castles, town halls and town squares throughout the land here, and in many exhibitions and events in Canada and the USA, France and Germany, Poland and Trinidad and throughout the Eastern Caribbean, in southern Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, Argentina and even China.

In fact, everywhere that values the principles that the Barons wrenched from the King at Runnymede. They had to fight for it, and we are the beneficiaries of their fight. The ever expanding list of events is kept up to date at www.magnacarta800th.com/Events.

You can follow the commemoration of the 800th by signing up to the MC Newsletter at our website and tell us if you'd like to get involved, at www.magnacarta800th.com.

And I hope, some of you will be with us on the 15th of June, the 800th anniversary at Runnymede, and some as well in Westminster Hall for the mock trial at the end of July, or at least watching it on the BBC, as I hope you have heard David Starkey on Magna

Carta, heard Melvin Bragg on Radio 4 on Magna Carta, even seen Bad King John in the Horrible Histories' Special on BBC TV, or even watched it on CBBC with one or more of the nation's children.

Special Relationship

The values enshrined in the Magna Carta and its legacy is largely the reason for the existence of the 'Special Relationship' that bonds my two countries, Britain and America. Two countries which have fought two world wars and many other, smaller, conflicts shoulder to shoulder **in defence of liberty.**

Ignoring the brief period during the late 18th and early 19th Centuries when relations between Britain and America were a somewhat different form of relationship that they have been over the last few centuries, President Obama observed in 2011 in a speech to the British Parliament: *“our system of justice, customs, and values stemmed from our British forefathers”*.

And President Obama said at Parliament:

“Our relationship is special because of the values and beliefs that have united our people throughout the ages. Centuries ago, when kings, emperors, and warlords reigned over much of the world, it was the English who first spelled out the rights and liberties on man in Magna Carta.”

Thank you.

Looking Back

Let's take a minute to look back over the past 100 or so years. President Theodore Roosevelt rather undiplomatically distinguished between 'real' Americans and 'hyphenated Americans' (Italian-Americans, Irish-Americans, and so on), and American Ambassador to the United Nations Henry Cabot Lodge somewhat undiplomatically argued that Americans of British descent had contributed three times as much to American abilities as all the others combined.

However chequered Anglo-American diplomatic relations had been in the nineteenth century, there was a strong feeling among Americans of English ancestry that the two nations

shared not only a common language, but common ideals, and that there was a need to assert their Anglo-Saxon heritage.

These sentiments were repeated at many early in the last century at Pilgrims functions: on his return from Washington, at the dinner in his honour on 6th November 1913, British Ambassador to the US, historian James, Lord Bryce who in 1917² declared that the friendship of the two countries rested on '*community of language, of literature, of institutions, of traditions, of ideals, of all those memories of the past which are among the most precious possessions of the two nations*'.

The first dinner in New York was held at the Waldorf Astoria on 4th February, 1903, the year following the founding of the British Pilgrims, to welcome Admiral Lord Charles Beresford, close friend of King Edward VII, and later a vice-president of the American Pilgrims. Soon after this dinner, King Edward VII and President Theodore Roosevelt gave permission for the Pilgrims to couple the King and the President in a single toast, and it became the custom, immediately after the toast, for the orchestra to play a few bars of 'God Save the King' and the 'Star-Spangled Banner', now a custom sadly lost along with the orchestral accompaniment to white tie dinners. For many years the speech of the principal guest was reprinted in the Times, and when it came into being, broadcast, live, on the BBC.

The Special Relationship has never been without rough edges, as with the reluctance of both President Wilson and Roosevelt to enter into European wars too soon, to the dismay of the beleaguered British. Certainly Churchill not only felt his maternal 'special relationship' existed, but between the governments and peoples as well, as did Macmillan.

Other rough edges included the tenure of the immediate pre-war American Ambassador Joseph Kennedy who did much to irritate his host country, but the affinity clearly shown by his son when in the Presidency for his 1,000 days strengthened the relationship and softened any lingering recall of the actions and words of his father. It reached a nadir in 1956 at the time of the Suez Crisis.³

On the other side, continuing the tradition of outspoken 'diplomats', was Lord Halifax, who in 1941 when sent to represent Britain in America described the thought of going to Washington as 'odious', and who told Baldwin that 'I have never liked Americans, except odd ones (sic). In the mass, I have always found them dreadful.' Later he reported to the King that he found Americans 'very much resemble a mass of nice children - a little crude, very warm-hearted and mainly governed by emotion.' He claimed to be unable to understand the American system of government, which he likened to a 'disorderly day's rabbit shooting'.

Certainly Churchill did much to cement the special relationship, spending weeks at a time as Roosevelt's guest in the White House during the war, and treating the American's envoys as 'one of us'. Both during and following the war he attended meetings of the cabinet in Washington, and clearly wished the relationship to work as closely in peace as in war. He instructed his chief scientific advisor as early as 1940 to tell the Americans '*everything* that Britain was doing in the scientific field', and joint military operations were as seamless as

² Malden, H. (Ed.), *Magna Carta Commemoration Essays*, Royal Historical Society, 1917, p. 4 – 5.

³ Kennedy-Pipe, Caroline, *Society Now*, Autumn 2009, p. 17

could be, in intent, if not always in practice, given the extraordinary personalities on both sides.

It was Churchill who commented, to Brooke, that there was only one thing worse than fighting with allies and that was fighting without them⁴. He spoke at a Pilgrims dinner in 1932 about the special relationship, saying whatever problems faced the two nations, *“I believe that there is one grand valiant conviction shared on both sides of the Atlantic. It is this: together, there is no problem we cannot solve.”*

Prime Minister Churchill, took over from Chamberlain in May 1940, and spoke again to the Pilgrims the following year⁵: *“The future of the whole world and the hopes of a broadening civilisation founded upon Christian ethics depend upon the relations between the British Empire...and of the United States of America. The identity of purpose and persistence of resolve prevailing thought the English-speaking world will more than any other single fact determine the way of life that will be open to the generations, and perhaps to the centuries, which follow our own...We stand therefore – all of us – upon the watchtowers of history.”*

As he was retiring as prime minister in 1955, his advice to his colleagues was two-fold: *“Man is Spirit,”* he said, -- and *“Never be separated from the Americans.”*⁶

Good advice then, good advice now.

But I would add advice to ‘our’ friends in America: *Never be separated from the British. In good times and bad, we’re your best friends in the world.*

But I say no more than Barak Obama said⁷ when he congratulated the newly elected Prime Minister David Cameron: *“The United States has no closer friend and ally than the United Kingdom. I reiterate my deep and personal commitment to the special relationship between our two countries – a bond that has endured for generations and across party lines, and that is essential to the security and prosperity of our two countries, and the world.”*

⁴ Worcester, Robert, Book Review of ‘*Fighting with Allies*’ by Sir Robin Renwick in *Europe-Atlantic Journal*, October 1996

⁵ January 9th, 1941

⁶ Meacham, John, *Franklin and Winston: An intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship*, Random House, 2003, p. 29

⁷ 11 May 2010

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