

# The UK should expect no favors from the new president: Trump will look out for Trump.

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*Both the UK and the US have experienced massive political earthquakes with the former's vote to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump. But what should the UK expect from the Trump administration? Adam Quinn argues that despite some optimists' views that the nativism which has seemingly swept both countries may bode well for the 'special relationship', Trump may try to drive a hard bargain in any new US-UK trade deal, and the UK's attempt to jettison Europe may see its role and relevance as an Atlantic bridge begin to slip away.*



Last year will be remembered as the one when, on more than one political front, the unthinkable happened. Between them, British citizens' vote to leave the European Union, and Americans' to elect Donald Trump as president, exploded dynamite at the foundations of the established order. As the dust clears, liberals now nervously inspect the blast sites, wondering if the damage might yet be contained or if the soundness of the edifice has been fatally undermined.

Not everyone is worried, however. Some are exultant. Trump rose to power on a wave of frustration and fury directed at 'the establishment' and the status quo. He is the avatar of a surging reactionary movement: empowered by a coalition of the traditionalist right and part of what was once the blue-collar left (white, male and often Midwest-dwelling), which come together in seething resentment at their perceived economic, cultural and political marginalization. During the campaign he repeatedly cited the Brexit vote as an inspiration, predicting that his campaign too would awaken a dormant electorate and confound conventional wisdom. While other British politicians kept their distance and their counsel, UKIP leader Nigel Farage not only praised him but actually spoke at one of his febrile rallies.

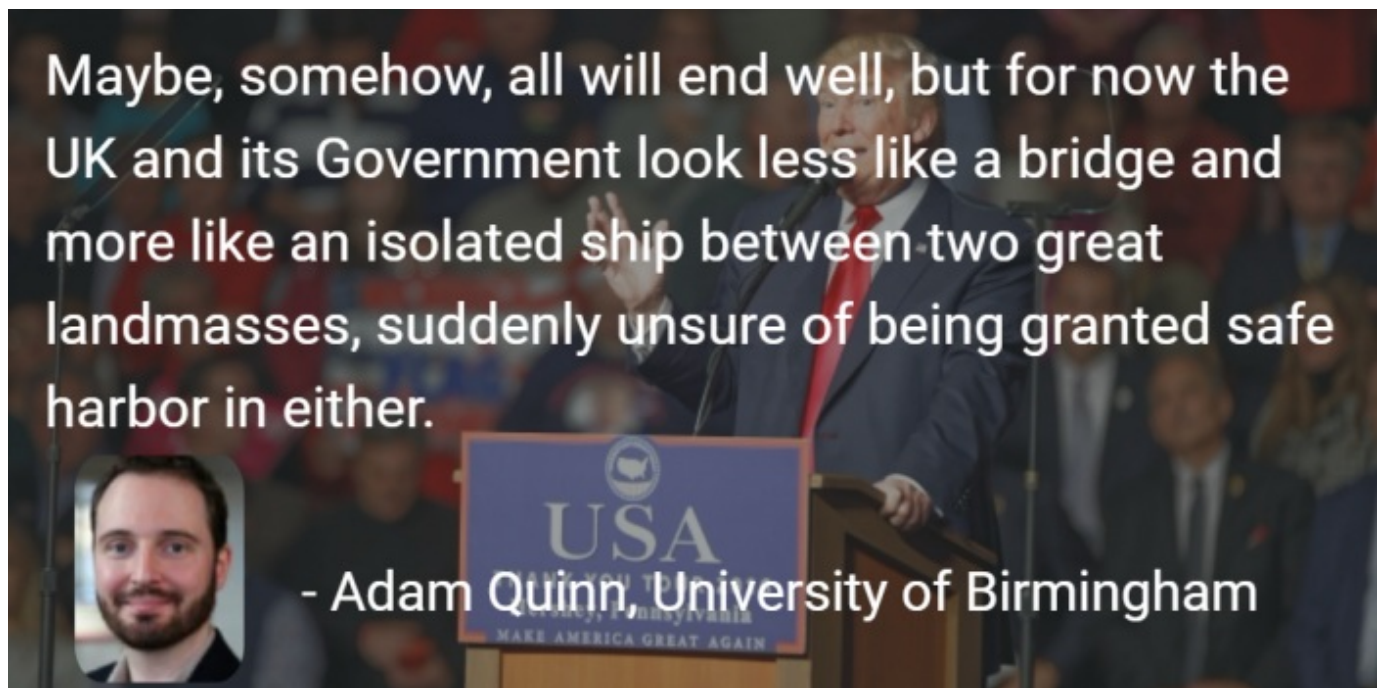
As a starting point in considering the implications for US-UK relations of Trump's triumph, we might therefore note this: even if British public opinion is sceptical that Trump will be a 'good' president, he does represent the political triumph of similar forces to those gathering strength here. British people naturally find their own nationalism and nativism more palatable than that of others – that's in the nature of the phenomenon. But the two countries have undeniably entered similar territory, with a culture war over national identity, between entrenched liberal and reactionary camps, set to provide the centrepiece of their politics for the foreseeable.

A determined British optimist might suggest that this bodes well for the prospects of good relations. If the United States is going to be governed by people nostalgic for an era of Anglo-American dominance, perhaps the prospect of a reinvigorated 'special relationship' with the UK will hold more appeal for them than it did for their predecessors. Those who campaigned for Britain to leave the EU frequently asserted that doing so would liberate the UK to pursue freer trade deals with many non-European nations. Where President Obama notoriously warned that the Britain would find itself "at the back of the queue" for talks on a new trade deal with the United States if it voted to Leave, a change of American leadership has brought with it at the very least a different tone. In a pre-inauguration interview with former Cabinet Minister and Leave supporter, Michael Gove, president-elect Trump praised Brexit as "smart", said the UK was "doing great" and floated the prospect of a speedier trade deal "We're gonna work very hard to get it done quickly and done properly. Good for both sides."

Another talking point for the optimistic camp would be that some of Trump's statements during and after the campaign regarding US reconsideration of its "obsolete" NATO commitments, and his desire for warmer relations with Russia, might make other European nations appreciate more keenly the importance of Britain's military contributions to European security. If the security umbrella provided by the US for generations begins to look less

comprehensive or less reliable, might EU states be less inclined to alienate one of Western Europe's two nuclear powers with a punitive Brexit settlement? This argument is surely a stretch, but with effort one might convince oneself that the UK might indirectly benefit from the rattling uncertainty generated by Trump.

But the downside risks for the UK should be clear. On trade: one of Trump's two signature issues during his fiery campaign – alongside a border wall with Mexico symbolising his anti-immigration credentials – was a relentless rhetorical assault on free trade, slamming both the NAFTA treaty and trade with China for costing Americans' jobs. The nature of goods and services traded between the US and UK is different than with those countries, to be sure, but it would still make for odd political optics for the Trump administration to make negotiation and ratification of a new free trade deal with the UK a high and early priority – unless, that is, it is one that he can advertise as an unequivocal win for US interests. Given the desperate [British position](#), the greater bargaining power of the United States and Trump's penchant for brutality in driving home an advantage, any new US-UK arrangement might involve [tougher terms](#) than the supposedly intolerable constraints that led the UK to abandon the EU.



On military strategy, if it even needs articulating: the UK has been a major beneficiary of the security guarantees provided by the United States to Europe against external aggression since the 1940s. Even if, as one of Europe's relatively stronger military powers, Britain's standing among other European nations might be somewhat boosted as a tangential consequence, the weakening of American commitment to Europe's unconditional defence would represent a strategic loss to both the UK and Europe of incalculable scale.

And then there is the complicating factor, for the UK government's relationship with Trump, of his warm and encouraging relations with the 'populist' right in Europe. Prime Minister Theresa May was, apparently, not a high-priority call for the president-elect after his victory, while Nigel Farage succeeded in making himself the first British party leader to secure [meeting](#), and touted himself as a potential intermediary for the British government, much to the latter's displeasure. Meanwhile UKIP sources [floated](#) the notion that Steve Bannon, newly-appointed chief strategist of the incoming Trump White House and former executive chairman of Breitbart News, a white-nationalism-inflected 'alt-right' media outlet, would "run ideas" past Farage before raising them with Downing Street. Trump has publicly [criticised](#) Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, who must soon seek re-election, for making a "catastrophic mistake" by taking in refugees, and called the EU "a vehicle for Germany." Marine Le Pen, leader and presidential candidate of the French National Front [visited](#) Trump Tower for unexplained reasons this month.

Since only the UK Government proper can meaningfully serve as an interlocutor, something more like normality has

unsurprisingly begun to reassert itself in place of the 'Farage moment' the closer Trump has come to taking office. Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson laid some groundwork for reconciliation with some eye-catchingly favourable [comments](#) following Trump's election, and then [travelled](#) to the US to meet with Trump's team. A meeting between Trump and May is [planned](#) for the spring. Nevertheless, any British Conservative with their wits engaged knows that even if they have no choice but to work with Trump, this is not a Republican president who feels any of the sense of connection to their tribe felt by a Reagan or a Bush. Rather, this is someone who will quite cheerfully give encouragement, at their expense, to the competing forces on their right if and when circumstances present and the mood takes him.

Trump's rise may demonstrate that the ceiling of political support for unmoderated racially-charged nativism is much higher than previously imagined, and if his political appeal and the demographics of his base do correlate with those of the Brexit campaign, his presidency may provide an injection of confidence to the UK's right wing populists just as they seemed to be on a downward trajectory (or at least just as UKIP did). A top priority of Theresa May's Conservative Party is to secure itself in power as the agent trusted by Leave voters to see that decision through, while at the same time holding a more moderate line on immigration, race and national identity than UKIP and the further right. The vast technical challenges of negotiating Britain's EU exit were already certain to strain the government's political support in due course. A rejuvenated populist right on its flank, unencumbered – as Trump has taught them is politically profitable – by responsibility or restraint, would make the task of governing still harder.

For decades, the UK aspired to position itself as a strategic bridge – economic and diplomatic – between the United States and Europe. Having just tossed the jigsaw pieces of its relationship with Europe into the air, the UK now finds that Trump's election has cast its relations with America into a period of inescapable uncertainty too. Maybe, somehow, all will end well, but for now the UK and its Government look less like a bridge and more like an isolated ship between two great landmasses, suddenly unsure of being granted safe harbor in either.

We do not yet know how the erratic and inconsistent candidate that was Donald Trump will make the transition to governing. But all evidence available so far suggests he will govern as a venal aspirant strongman at home, and that he will make America a much less reliable friend to the security and democratic values of traditional allies abroad. Experience shows that if one's interests happen to coincide with those of Donald Trump for a time, then for so long as that lasts he may be a potent force with which to be aligned. [His life history](#) reveals starkly, however, that to imagine he will embrace the defence of others' interests when they prove inconvenient to himself, even if he has notionally promised to do so, is to misjudge the man.

*This is an updated version of a post which originally appeared at [The UK in a Changing Europe](#)*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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