

# Explaining Obama's intervention: Why an EU without Britain would be the worst of all worlds for the United States

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4/22/2016

President Obama has outlined his opposition to Britain leaving the European Union during an official visit to the country, but what explains the American position on Brexit? [Malcolm Craig](#) writes that the historical roots of Obama's stance stretch as far back as the 1940s and that the perception from across the Atlantic is that there is little to gain for Britain, Europe or the United States from a Brexit.



In an [open letter](#) in the Daily Telegraph this morning, President Obama reflected on history and our contemporary world to definitively support continued British membership of the EU. The President commented that with all the complex challenges faced by Britain, America, and many other nations, this was a time for "friends and allies to stick together". He had previously suggested that his administration favours continued British EU membership, commenting that the European single market is good for both the UK and the US economies.

This focus on finance and economics was also evident in an open letter to The Times, where a collective of former US Treasury Secretaries opined that "a vote to leave Europe represents a risky bet on the country's economic future." US trade representative Michael Froman [stated](#) that should Britain withdraw from the single market, the US would be manifestly disinterested in a separate UK-UK trade agreement. The preference it seems is for bloc agreements such as the controversial [Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership](#).



Historically, however, the US stance on Britain's position in an integrated Europe has been influenced by a much wider array of factors than just trade and economics. This remains true today, even though it is the economic aspects that tend to dominate the headlines. Just as it was in the 1940s at the dawn of the Cold War, the US still desires a prosperous Europe that looks outwards to the world. From 1947 onwards the United States – under the leadership of a series of presidents with widely differing perspectives – was a significant supporter of European integration. When the Marshall Plan proved a not entirely successful means of trying to impose an American system on western Europe, attention turned towards supporting the primarily French led efforts at unification.

US support for those efforts, which formed the bedrock for the current European Union, stemmed from the emerging Cold War. For the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, the political stability and economic prosperity that closer integration offered would help to avoid the destructive inter-state conflict that plagued pre-1945 Europe. Moreover, such stability and prosperity would provide the necessary bulwark against what was perceived as expansionist Soviet communism.

As western Europe began to come together in the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration also saw integration as an important means of preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons. The [European Atomic Energy Community](#)

(EURATOM) held out the hope that more potentially destabilising national nuclear arsenals could be avoided. For US presidents since 1945, the ideal number of nuclear weapon states has been one, a position that looked increasingly untenable as first the USSR and then the UK developed their own atomic capabilities (in 1949 and 1952 respectively). The provision of nuclear technology through EURATOM offered the chance to head off other nascent national nuclear programmes in West Germany and Italy, thus lessening the chances of an independently minded European leader kicking off a nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

So far, so clear cut. But what of the UK? Looking towards the Commonwealth (as some do today), Britain stood aloof as integration gathered pace. Aloof, that is, until 1955 when it seemed that an integrated European community was about to become a significant and powerful entity. This led to the British government's brief – and fruitless – dalliance with trying to strangle the EEC in its crib. In this case, the Eisenhower administration stepped in to indicate that Washington favoured integration for a range of economic, political, and military reasons. London backed down, concerned that further opposition could damage the all-important US-UK relationship.

US attitudes at least in part drove the British efforts to belatedly join the EEC in the 1960s. French President Charles De Gaulle's vetoes in 1961 and 1967 were founded on his belief that the UK would merely be a stalking horse for US interests in Europe, threatening France's leading position. In many ways, the blustering De Gaulle was correct.

His increasingly anti-American attitude and withdrawal from NATO's command structure in 1966 represented a serious threat to western solidarity. Lyndon Johnson's administration felt that an EEC with Britain inside would be a bulwark against the potential dissolution of vital Cold War institutions. And despite serious differences of opinion over the Vietnam War, London loyally went along by supporting the US during the NATO Crisis of 1966, strengthening the case for British membership of the EEC, bolstering NATO, and reinforcing US-UK ties.

Britain's eventual accession to the EEC on 1 January 1973 came under the premiership of Ted Heath, more European and less Atlanticist in his outlook than many of his predecessors. Britain's membership was successfully (but on a limited scale) renegotiated and re-presented to the British public by Harold Wilson's government in 1975, but overall the 1970s were a trying time for UK-US-EEC relations. Going cap in hand to its neighbours, London attempted to dig itself out of a financial hole until it had to turn in 1976 to the International Monetary Fund. Eventual US intervention in the negotiations avoided British bankruptcy, but at the cost of an upwards trend in unemployment.

Europe has entered a challenging period in its post-Cold War history, thanks to terrorism, Russian military activity, civil war, and the abject misery of thousands of refugees entering the EU on a daily basis. Just as it was during the Cold War, the EEC and its partner institutions such as EURATOM and – to a certain extent – NATO face some familiar trials. That being said, the context and nature of these issues are quite different from those posed in 1947-89 period. As Barack Obama alluded to today, the United States maintains an interest in a prosperous, vital Europe that is capable of meeting these challenges. A Europe without Britain and a Britain without Europe would make it all the harder to face current issues head on and add another undesired layer of complexity to the view from Washington.

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