A Racist Peace?
How Britain and the U.S. Made Their Relationship “Special”

Srdjan Vucetic sv304@cam.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

The extensive literature on the Anglo-American “special relationship” revolves around an observation that the relationship between Britain and the U.S. differs in significant ways from that of any other two states of comparable power and status in the international society. Against realist and liberal explanations, I argue that the “special relationship” originates in what can be regarded as a racist peace. My argument builds on a theorization of the link between state/national identity and foreign policy during the Venezuela crisis of 1895-6. Subjecting a representative archive of contemporary texts to discourse analysis, I show how American and British foreign policy elites succeeded in framing themselves as Anglo-Saxons, a vanguard of the human civilization. Against extant realist and liberal explanations of the same case, I show how shared racialized identity diffused the crisis, while simultaneously enabling conflict between the Anglo-Saxons and their racialized Others.

KEY WORDS

Anglo-American Special Relationship, identity, democratic peace, discourse analysis
The extensive literature on the Anglo-American “special relationship” (AASR) revolves around an observation that the relationship between Britain and the U.S. differs in significant ways from that of any other two states in the international system. The magnitude, frequency and durability of the Anglo-American cooperation are indeed remarkable, particularly relative to comparable major power dyads. International Relations (IR) has shied away from theorizing this phenomenon directly, but the starting points have been clearly laid out by the mainstream theoretical approaches. Realists come out as skeptics: special relationships do not exist in international politics, only alliances and coalitions. The vaunted AASR is nothing but a series of coordinated responses to common threats, starting with a common front against the post-revolutionary France in 1798 and continuing through against the present-day al-Qaeda and Taliban. Liberals point that Britain and the U.S. have been the world’s leading liberal democracies for over a century. In line with liberalism’s “democratic peace” (DP) thesis, liberal democracies like Britain and the U.S. make for dependable partners. As for constructivists, they tend to regard the AASR as a paradigmatic case of a “security community” based on shared identity.

Taking the constructivist perspective on identity as my theoretical starting point, I submit that the AASR originates in the racialized identity politics at the turn-of-the-twentieth century. I argue that Anglo-American elites succeeded in framing themselves as the Anglo-Saxon race, a vanguard of the human civilization, thus making what can be called a “racist peace.” While this move contributed to the peaceful resolution of the outstanding Anglo-American disputes, it simultaneously facilitated conflict between the Anglo-Saxons and their racialized Others. My argument is based on a theorization of
state/national identity as process and draws on frame analysis as practiced in social movement theory (Benford and Snow 2000, cf. Krebs and Jackson 2007). I posit state/national identity as a cause of international conflict and cooperation and from my theoretical framework I derive two empirically testable propositions: first, the dominant discourse of identity at the state/national level shapes foreign policy by making some orientations more likely than others. Second, foreign policy debates on the fit between identity and perceived reality influence foreign policy outcomes.

I evaluate these claims against primary-source evidence drawn from the Venezuela crisis of 1895-6, a case of a U.S. intervention in a boundary dispute between Venezuela and the British Empire. The evaluation proceeds in three discourse-analytical steps: first, reading texts written and read in sixteen months preceding the crisis (August 1894-December 1895), I identify the main discourses of identity at the level of state-society relations in Britain and the U.S. Next, using a separate archive of texts, I analyze foreign policy debates. Last I process-trace American and British foreign policy decisions. Two caveats: first, my theoretical framework is pitched at the unit level, which means that the observable international behavior is assumed to be the product of choice or a pattern of human choices made on the basis of some dimension such as state/national identity. Ontologically speaking, identities are constructed on, and across, all levels of analysis, but it is impossible to treat them simultaneously with the same analytical depth. Second, I do not provide a theory of interstate interaction, only a proposition about the likely outcome resulting from the interactions of two actors should each actor hold a particular perception of the other’s identity.
The *fin-de-siècle* peace between Britain and the U.S. has long puzzled IR theory (Rock 1989, Roussel 2004, Thompson 1999). My focus will be on one literature in particular—the first-wave debate on the DP thesis (Layne 1994, Maoz 1997, Owen 1994, 1997, Rock 1997, Russett 1995). According to liberals, the Anglo-American war over Venezuela in 1895-6 was averted thanks to the pacifying effect of democratic norms and democratic political structures. Realists read the crisis differently: what caused peace was Britain’s last minute appeasement of the U.S., a policy of backing off in the hope of avoiding war. So instead of being a poster child for the DP thesis, the Venezuela crisis was a classic “near-miss.” It is not clear which side won the debate, given that most participants agreed that the *fin-de-siècle* Anglo-American peace was largely overdetermined. But it was partly through this debate that the DP thesis acquired its famous sub-clause: democracies never or almost never fight each other.

As a repository of alternative arguments, this literature is extremely valuable for the evaluation of my theoretical propositions. In the ideal world, any such evaluation should follow the identical metatheoretical grounding and the identical evidentiary base. IR, however, is no such world: constructivism follows an intersubjective ontology, realism and liberalism do not. In principle, realists and liberals assume that states understand their strategic position with little or no distortion; what matters in these perspectives is not meaning so much as information. Discourses and debates within and between states reflect material realities on the ground: what actors say, in short, is a function of the distribution of material capabilities at home and abroad—anything from guns and butter to information about guns and butter.
In practice, however, many realist and liberal accounts of world politics move to analyze the effect of power and interest on international relations through process-tracing, a tool for the interpretation of text technically similar to discourse analysis (George and Bennett 2005). For process-tracers, historical evidence that suggests decision-makers “think and act” like positive-theory realists (e.g., like a self-interested egoist) or positive-theory liberals (e.g., like a liberal democrat talking to another liberal democrat) is counted in favor of theory. Agents’ subjective understandings of social facts like war and peace therefore serve as a useful source of evidence as do intersubjective meanings—inferences on whether most relevant political actors within think and act in a certain way. The value added of process-tracing lies precisely in the opportunity to examine whether the theoretical logics operate as advertised.

Precisely because process-tracing allows me to see how the objective material environments such as the balance of threat or democratic alliances are translated in the historical foreign policy debates, I can treat realism and liberalism as social facts comparable to the discourses of identity: if realists and liberals are correct, texts left behind by the relevant political actors should reflect realist and liberal worldviews or perceptions. Put otherwise: if realists are right, the Anglo-American decision-makers would filter information in terms of geographic proximity or relative capabilities and threats. If liberals are right, the decision-makers would make sense of the world mostly in terms of regime type. And if my account is right, the political actors would follow the discourses and debates on identity.¹

¹ Neither realism nor liberalism foregrounds a theory of perceptions, but numerous first-wave DP studies treat perceptions as causal, if auxiliary factors (Owen 1997: 15, 589-90).
FROM DISCOURSES OF IDENTITY TO FOREIGN POLICY

Like all collective identities, state/national identity can be conceptualized as a social category that varies along two dimensions, content and contestation or, roughly, structure and process (Abdelal et al. 2006). The first generation of constructivist scholarship in IR focused on structure, mostly due to a desire to demonstrate how identities trump contrary material pressures (Wendt 1999). Though it established constructivism as a mainstream theoretical perspective in IR, this diminished the power of identity-based explanations. For example, political actors were found to be subject to several identities, some of which mattered more than others in given policy situations (Hammer and Katzenstein 2002). The current constructivist work on identity has begun to take process seriously but the heaviest theoretical lifting still remains to be done. Seemingly basic questions such as under what conditions some identities trump others, how are policy situations defined in terms of identity or how plausible alternative are marginalized are still omitted from the theoretical to-do list (Krebs and Jackson 2007).

My theoretical framework seeks to answer these questions. I begin with an assumption that the processes upon which the state/nation comes to condition its Self can be empirically recovered. One way to account for these processes is to theorize state/national identities as discourses or structured practices of communication over the proverbial “who we are.”

2 Contemporary discourse theory has significantly departed from its Foucauldian origins. For discourse-based theories in IR, see, inter alia, Hansen (2006), Hopf (2002) and Wæver (2005).
are seen as embodied in discourses and vice versa, in a continual feedback loop; foreign policy, too, is part of this loop. In a human collective such as the state/nation, one is likely to find more than one discourse of identity. In a given historical context, some discourses can be expected to be dominant (hegemonic or governing), while others are challenging (counterhegemonic or subaltern). Allowing for the empirical character of multiplicity and dominance, the relationship between discourse and policy can be expressed as a testable proposition; all things equal, foreign policy is likely to follow the dominant discourse of identity.³

It is important to note that discourse-based theoretical approaches accord no necessary and independent role to humans, whether they are seen as the authors of text or policy makers. In IR, for example, constructivist ontology famously has agents and structures as co-constituted, but constructivist theory tends to drop human agency in favor of structures (Sending 2002). In my theoretical framework, human agency is manifested through arguing, as a particular form of communication aimed at winning an audience or audiences. Arguing—also known as argumentation, deliberation, communicative action, rhetoric, or, most simply, talk—is pervasive in the social world. In IR, a community of “active-voice” constructivists has extensively dealt with the social-theoretic and social-scientific underpinnings of the independent role of talk, a topic that I therefore need not to engage here.⁴ From this growing literature, I derive a claim that the

³ The proposition becomes a falsifiable causal claim only if we temporarily “stabilize” one side of this relationship (identity) to explain the other (foreign policy). The separation is meant to be analytical, not ontological.

⁴ Note that not all IR theories incorporating talk are constructivist and that not all constructivists theorize talk. Those who do, rely on a variety of causal mechanisms which cannot be reviewed here. For examples of scholarships I have in mind, see, inter alia, Crawford (2002), Bially Mattern (2005), Krebs and Jackson (2007) and Mitzen (2005).
making of social facts such as identity or foreign policy is always contested and never complete in the sense that all political actors accept this construction or accept it to the same degree. By making arguments, therefore, political actors make situations, rather than simply thinking and acting within situational constraints. So while the dominant discourse of identity shapes foreign policy by ruling out the proverbial “impossibles,” it is arguing which makes some policy directions more likely than others.

In my approach, human agency begins with political elites, a category of people whose privileged institutional positions and reputations provide them with comparatively greater authority in social interactions. Political elites play as important a theoretical role as discourses: they argue in front of an audience in a bid to explain why their words and/or actions should be seen as legitimate, i.e., acceptable in terms of what is intersubjectively held meaningful, “true” and/or “valid.” The key situational constraint is the audience or public—a fact that arguing has more than two participants. Political elites thus may express or articulate reasons to justify policy positions, plans or actions, but it is the public who judges what is legitimate or what is meaningful, true and/or valid in a given context and, consequently, what can be done.5 Though I recognized its highly context-bound nature, I assume that publicity always exists, even in secret or secretive cabinet-level deliberations. Because it constrains the statements and actions which actors can legitimately make in a given context, the public therefore can be seen as productive of foreign policy as well. Through arguing individuals and groups can impact the environment within which they operate, and sometimes radically so. One way to theorize the effect of arguing on foreign policy, I posit, is to account for the role of debates.

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5 A legitimacy crisis occurs when the claims of what is true and/or valid cannot keep pace with shifts in the operation or location of political authority (Crawford 2002: 80-1, 122-3).
The key difference between discourses and debates lies in flexibility and variability (Wæver 2005, Krebs and Jackson 2007). Discourses represent deeper layers of meaning which are slow to change. In contrast, debates are more bounded episodes of contestation in which human agency comes to the fore. While elites—and especially policy makers—cannot say just about anything (not without a risk of losing their job or status for being incomprehensible to their audience), they need not say the same thing in all contexts. Indeed, political elites who offer legitimate arguments in debates look to solidify or improve their social standing. Foreign policy debates are nested in the wider discourses, but policy is always mediated by some form of the public expression of state/national identity. It is important to underscore that my account of contestations brackets the actors’ motives, preferences, intentions or sincerity. What analytically matters for me are the *framing* moves the actors make to justify or legitimize their positions. What makes framing moves competitive in a political arena, I propose, is their “fit” with the underlying discourses of identity. To succeed in arguing in front of the public, political elites must master the discourses of identity in the sense that their truth- or validity-claims cannot refer to fantasy or unlikely meanings. Successful argumentation can thus be seen as a function of the fit—also known as accessibility,

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7 This conceptualization builds on social movement theory, as it is applied in IR (Benford and Snow 2000, cf. Crawford 2002, Krebs and Jackson 2007). Framing can be said to occur for many conscious and unconscious reasons, but mostly because the actors seek to make their actions convincing and/or clear.
click, congruence or match—between the speaker’s frames and the dominant interpretation of facts and events grouped under the intersubjective rubric of “reality.”

The phrases “reality constraints” and “events/facts on the ground” point out that foreign policy is not a closed system: any argument on identity logically generates a set of expectations about future, which can be challenged by what goes on in the world. As new events and facts emerge and reality constraints change, political actors move to reappraise extant discourses anew, which opens the door for change in foreign policy orientations. Depending on the outcome of contestations, the dominant readings of reality can be strengthened or challenged. If events and fact validate expectations, an argument—and so the identities, policies, and institutions that the argument supports—are likely to be consolidated. Conversely, if there is a misfit between the argument and the perceived reality, the extant policy orientations will be destabilized. Misfit can therefore cause a chain reaction: it creates new opportunities and constraints, leading to differential empowerment of political actors and, ultimately, change. Fit and misfit are themselves a function of perceptions and misperceptions, but what matters analytically are their frames and counterframes.

A key causal mechanism behind the foreign policy process lies in the interaction of actor choices and the possibilities enabled or constrained by the underlying discursive structures. If the policy stakeholders deem the fit between the discourses of identity and the perceived reality to be appropriate, they will rebuff or deflect calls for change and the extant policy position is likely to hold. Conversely, if the dominant readings are

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8 Fit is theorized in multiple bodies of knowledge. In IR, see, *inter alia*, Bially Mattern (2005), Börzel and Risse (2003) and Hansen (2006). Once again, the separation between discourse and reality or fact is meant to be analytical, not ontological.
invalidated by the observations of the misfit, calls for change will intensify and so will the likelihood for policy shifts. From the point of view of arguing and legitimation, the theoretical step from calls for change and change is indeed short: a victory in a debate over the fit between identity and the putative reality makes one’s preferred outcome more likely as the opponent will have limited ground from which to legitimately oppose the policy. So if the representatives of the status quo position in foreign policy succeed in consistently interpreting the actions of a rival state as harmful, the government is likely to reject the opposition calls for more cooperation with the rival. Conversely, if the opposition is able to show that the rival state has turned into a friend, then the government is likely to be forced to open up space for more international cooperation.

The fit can be analyzed in terms of the claims of consistency and coherence, which, lumped together, can be seen as the logical connection to prior acts and/or statements. So if consistency and coherence bode well for the actor’s political future, hypocrisy—a blatant violation of the terms of one’s own discourse—leads to costly “rhetorical entrapments” and “blowbacks” and nearly immediate political troubles. Though one could certainly imagine a world in which hypocrisy is seen as inconsequential, the gap between the word and the deed bears political costs in front of most audiences most of the time. A related source of political trouble is fantasy—an imagined situation which does not correspond with the prevailing intersubjective consensus on what constitutes reality. Though not as intentional as hypocrisy, policy positions interpreted as fantasy also lead to rhetorical entrapments and the loss of political capital. In both cases, political actors can change foreign policy by pointing out the inconsistency and incoherence in a particular understanding of objective realities; put
otherwise, policy positions that came to be perceived as unsustainable put pressure on political actors to change the status quo or risk losing their jobs. This dynamic can be expressed in the form of a proposition: the greater the perceived fit between the dominant discourse and the perceived reality, the greater the continuity in foreign policy choices.

To sum it up, my theoretical framework approaches foreign policy from the perspective of the content and contestation of identity at the unit level. The analysis begins with an inductive recovery of the discourses of identity and then moves to analyze foreign policy debates on the fit between the discourse of identity and the perceived reality. Two testable propositions are as follows: a) foreign policy will be shaped by the dominant discourse of identity and b) foreign policy will be shaped by the debates on the fit between identity and the perceived reality. Using the causal arrows as a heuristic tool, my argument can be presented thus: discourses of identity → foreign policy debates on the fit → Foreign policy orientations → International conflict/ cooperation.

To evaluate my argument, I rely on discourse analysis (DA), a qualitative and interpretative recovery of meanings from texts (Abdelal et al 2006, Hopf 2002). The task of my DA is to contextualize identities, i.e., interpret and code identities as they are present in an individual text; and then intertextualize them, i.e., to interpret and code identities across a sample of texts. The methodological objective of this exercise is to find which identities are present and which predominate, both in terms of their frequency and across sources, in a given context. My DA focuses on relatively brief junctures of history and geography and samples texts which are sufficiently wide and diverse to pass as representative. Appendix A contains a detailed list of sources and sampling criteria.
Following my theoretical set-up, I access three categories of texts: the discourses of identity in the society, foreign policy debates and specific foreign policy decisions.

If my argument is correct, we should expect that policy follows a) the dominant discourse of identity and b) outcome of foreign policy debate on the fit between the discourse of identity and the perceived reality. My argument will be falsified if a policy has no relationship either with discourse and/or debates. So with respect to the first proposition (a), my argument would be falsified if I find that foreign policy elites are able to make policy entirely as they wish, “on a whim.” The second proposition (b) can be broken into two testable claims: b1) the greater the fit, the more likely it is that a policy will continue; and b2) the greater the misfit, the more likely it is that a policy shift will take place. Two kinds of findings would cast doubt on my argument here: one, if a policy shifts to an alternative option despite the presence of the rhetorically demonstrable fit between the dominant understanding of state/national identity and the perceived reality; two, if a policy continues despite the rhetorically demonstrable misfit between discourse and the perceived reality.

My archive of closely analyzed primary source texts for all three analytical steps consists of eight hundred units of text. To a professional historian, the number may appear illegitimate, despite claims to legitimacy made by the deployment of sampling techniques. So to substantiate—as well as corroborate—my DA, I consult the vast secondary literature on the subject. As a general rule, I rely on cultural, intellectual and social history in the first step and on diplomatic history on the second and third. As all histories are exercises in exclusion, bias, and implicit theorization, I attempt to select on
the scope as well as political and theoretical variation. In practice, I try to triangulate among interpretations of the same event or series of events given by different historical schools (e.g., orthodoxy, revisionism, post-revisionism). This secondary source cross-check helped me establish if my text selection was ideal-typical in terms of “what the past was like” or, more accurately, in terms of structures of meaning we might attribute to historical documents or events. And where my reading of history disagrees with the dominant readings supplied by professional historians, I place a warning sign in the form of footnote. In the rest of the article, I first present the findings of my DA and then move to analyze American and British foreign policy debates and decisions pertaining to the Venezuela crisis. The presentation, note, will be entirely stylized, in the spirit of a short paper prepared for the workshop. For a more exhaustive discussion of the findings, please refer to the paper I submitted to the workshop via email on March 16, 2009.

THE RISE OF ANGLO-SAXONISM

In the contemporary English language, terms such as the state, people, nation and nationality were used largely interchangeably with race (my archive does not contain the word ethnicity). “Racialism,” a belief that the world is composed of races at different stages of civilization, probably originated in the natural sciences but it swiftly turned into something of an ontological axiom for the social sciences and humanities. Most theories posited a basic race-based hierarchy made up of multiple units—anywhere from

9 A broader foray into secondary literature is necessary to ameliorate a selection bias – or bias and selectivity – which arises when analysis follows on historical facts hitherto interpreted by similar theoretical perspectives (Thies 2002: 358-366).

two to sixty-three, but usually three to five—coded by geography and/or physiognomy. Virtually every race-related text in my archive assumed the existence of a causal relationship between race and the relative success of individuals and groups, such that one’s racialized identity determined one’s social status. But race-talk was profoundly confused and confusing. One of the typical points of contestation was whether race was “blood”/biology or “spirit”/culture/history. In my archive, neither nature-based nor culture-based theories of race prevailed; most texts in fact regarded race-as-blood and race-as-spirit as compatible. Because all national elites at the time cultivated myths of superiority and declared positive human attributes to bedistinctively national, it is not surprising to discover that the contemporary Anglo-American elites believed that “their” race constituted the most mature stage of civilization. What is surprising, however, is that the professed superiority was neither American nor English/British, but *Anglo-Saxon*. In my archive, the racialized Self emerged as by and large transnational.

The popular sources of reference at the time trace the word Anglo-Saxon to its eight century Latin roots, when it was used as to describe the main language spoken in Britain. Synonyms, depending on the context, included English/British and Yankee, but the term “WASP” (White, Anglo-Saxon-Protestant) arrived much later. From the present-day viewpoint, it is easy to regard Anglo-Saxonism, like all racialized identities, as “an echoing cavern of banalities” (Kramer 2004: 1321). But in the American and British societies at the turn of the twentieth century, Anglo-Saxonism constituted the dominant discourse of identity.

In 1894, foreign policy debates in London and Washington both centered on imperialism: the British argued over “decline,” the Americans talked about “expansion.”
In Britain, Anglo-Saxonism was hegemonic at all levels of discourse. Indicative is the “Irish Question,” also known under the rubric of “Home Rule.” Rather than an issue of tedious parliamentary and constitutional politics, this was an issue of identity: what had hitherto been seen as a single British race was in 1894 divided into the Anglo-Saxondom and the “Celtic Fringe.” For the London elite, the Irish at home were clearly more distant and more different than the Anglo-Saxon “cousins” and “brothers” across the Atlantic. In the summer of 1898, for example, six contributors to a round table in *The Spectator* on the question: “Are Americans Anglo-Saxons?” gave an affirmative answer, save for a token Irishman (Orde 1996: 198, n. 47).

On the other side of the Atlantic, the elites were not so sure. America’s Anglo-Saxon identity had to be constructed against a more nationally bounded alternative. In an ideal-typical reading, the American debate revolved around three keywords: “Manifest Destiny” the “Monroe Doctrine” and the “frontier.” Each served to simultaneously imply America’s distinction from the Old World and its expansive mission in the New. Thus Manifest Destiny referred to a belief in the “inevitability” of American territorial expansion, while the Monroe Doctrine related to a program for eliminating non-American colonization of the western hemisphere. (Thus American expansion was seen as necessary in preventing a European one). The keyword frontier gained headlines following the publication of Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” in 1894. In essence, Turner argued that the American Self needed change because the 1890 national census map, for the first time in American history, showed no frontier line. Turner’s “what next?” coincided with an extended economic depression, farmer and worker unrest and, most important, fears of “alien” immigration. In DA, the meanings of these
keywords were debated between two main discursive positions: “exceptionalism” versus “expansionism.” Exceptionalists disputed the Anglo-Saxonist rationale for imperialism in three main frames. They argued, first, that Americans were not Anglo-Saxons; second, that Anglo-Saxonism was a cheap British trick; and third, that it was inconsistent with America’s unique “creed.” All three frames heavily built on Anglophobia, a major counterdiscourse to Anglo-Saxonism which found clearest contemporary expression in the powerful agrarian populist movement. In my DA, all three frames failed in front of the American public for the same reason. Because nearly every text in this period assumed racial evolution and hierarchy, it was extremely difficult to argue against the racialized rationale of public policy regarding anything from national unity to the oppression of “lower” or “inferior” races at home. In both Washington and London Anglo-Saxonism’s grip on foreign policy debates delegitimized the idea of an Anglo-American war.

A RACIST PEACE?

U.S. intervention in a long-standing British-Venezuelan border dispute over what appeared to be a gold-rich piece of land began in June 1895. In a communiqué sent to London, State Secretary Olney invoked the Monroe Doctrine and demanded submission of the dispute to US arbitration, because the US was “practically sovereign” in the hemisphere. An initial British dismissal was followed by another invocation of the Doctrine, in December of the same year, this time by President Cleveland before Congress. Venezuela gained headlines in the U.S. press (“War if Necessary” ran one title page) and support for resolute action came from some Republicans as well. Stock exchanges in Wall Street and Capel Court briefly collapsed. Britain was stunned. That
winter saw a great deal of public and private diplomacy: from artists to church leaders to representatives of labour and business leaders, elites on both sides of the Atlantic lobbied both governments to resolve the crisis. Petitions, like the “Anglo-American Memorial,” were signed by thousands. By January, the entire American press called for peace. Causing a transatlantic sigh of relief, the British government accepted arbitration in February. In November, London signed an arbitration agreement, which was read as the British endorsement of the Monroe Doctrine (Times, 10 November 1896; The Economist, 14 November 1896).

The Venezuela crisis shows how crises are spoken into existence. Britain and the US to come “within measurable distance of war,” despite the lack of an “objective” reason for one (Pletcher 1998: 379). Most historians indeed describe the crisis with qualifiers such as “synthetic.” For one, the U.S. reaction over Venezuela is puzzling given the non-reaction to a contemporaneous border dispute between France and Brazil, over the boundary of French Guiana or the British intervention in Nicaragua in the same year. Objectively, there was no reason for war; intersubjectively, I argue, war was impossible or, in to borrow from the contemporaries, “unthinkable.”

That not a single British text in my archive advocated a “colonial war” with the U.S. is odd considering that jingoism was the order of the day in dealing with similar crises abroad probably until the 1956 Suez crisis. Jingoism was certainly not absent after the British press learned about the infamous Kruger telegram in January 1896, a congratulatory note by Germany’s Kaiser to the president of the Transvaal for repelling the Jameson Raid, an infamous attempt to expand the British Cape Colony in South Africa made by a British imperial enthusiast. The two events were coincidental, but
virtually identical: each involved a foreign government’s message on what was publicly described as an act of British aggression. But the reception could not have been more different: resentment toward Germany was contrasted by conciliation towards the U.S.

In a typical realist explanation, the crisis was resolved because Britain’s strategic position worsened following the failure of the Jameson Raid (Layne 1994). As a result, the argument goes, London dropped belligerence toward Washington and opt for what was regarded as a time-honored policy of “apaisement [sic].” Doubtless, the hardening of the imperial game in South Africa softening game in South America, but the fact remains that both the British government and the British press were equally conciliatory towards the US before the news of the Kruger telegram reached London. In a comparative reading of the two crises, Anne Order observes, “the tone of British discourse reveals a peculiar perception of Anglo-American relations” (1996: 12).

Already in December, Chamberlain, described the possibility of the Anglo-American as “horror” (Ibid.: 11; May 1991: 48-51). Another striking comparison is the Franco-British colonial boundary clashes in Fashoda in 1898, when Whitehall famously mobilized the Royal Navy against France. During the Venezuela crisis, in contrast, the British government quickly ruled out the use of force and moved to discuss the relative merits of a one-time concession versus permanent arbitration (and even “race alliance”).

The liberal argument holds that respect for contracts and transparency inherent in the behaviour of British and American democracies minimized the need for armed enforcement. Liberal democracy caused peace. There are two related problems with the liberal story: first, in the nineteenth century, great powers/empires rarely submitted major disputes (such as those pertaining to their own boundaries or their breaches of wartime
neutrality) to international arbitration. Second, such submissions were no more frequent between democracies than between autocracies. A more convincing story, in my reading of historical evidence, is that which emphasizes race over liberal democracy. In the dominant Anglo-Saxon worldview, democracy was regarded to be in short supply everywhere but in the racially dominant English-speaking world (Oren 2003). For example, Kennedy finds that British elites, for no “objective” reason, differentiated German and American democracies. Germany’s lag in the racial evolution, in this view, caused a failure of democratic institutions, which, in turn, facilitated excessive “pride” and “aggressive nationalism” (1984: 21; also see 1980: 389, 399). In my DA, the antecedent ontological position of the Anglo-American elites at the time was race, not democracy. So to borrow from another context, it could be that Anglo-Saxon democracy was decisive for the Anglo-American peace, not merely Anglo-Saxon democracy.

In any sample of the turn-of-the-twentieth century English-language texts, the issue of race simply looms too large to be ignored by any IR scholar working on Anglo-American relations. At the same time, the causal value of racialized identity is usually minimized, to various degrees. My analysis of the Venezuela crisis suggests that Anglo-Saxonism played a central role, both as an underlying discursive structure and as a rhetorical trump card in foreign policy debates. The proposition that foreign policy will follow the dominant discourse in society easily obtains. Anglo-Saxonism can be seen as constitutive of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Britain and the U.S. in the sense it defined the meanings of the Anglo-American “who are we?” Also borne out by the evidence is the proposition that the misfit between the dominant discourse and events would cause foreign policy orientations to change. An argument that the Venezuela crisis
contradicted the Anglo-Saxon identity of Britain and the U.S. compelled both
governments to soften their policies. The fin-de-siècle Anglo-American peace, I contend,
was a racist peace above all.

My explanation sits comfortably with what is seen as a constructivist perspective
on security communities. In this view, the Venezuela crisis can be seen as a critical
juncture, a point at which the Anglo-American peace became subject to path dependence.
As I said earlier, one feature of the Venezuela crisis were the declarations of the
impossibility of the Anglo-American war. Logically speaking, declarations of the
unthinkability of war are evidence of its thinkability, but what is indicative here is that no
such declarations were made with respect to other states at the time, certainly not with
regularity. The crisis indeed compelled the elites on both sides of the Atlantic to go on a
crusade to delegitimize the Anglo-American war, while simultaneously legitimizing
cooperation and the “Anglo-Saxon unity.” Thanks to the prevalence of Anglo-Saxonism,
London and Washington were able to peacefully resolve outstanding disputes, namely the
isthmian canal treaty (1898-9) or the Alaskan panhandle boundary dispute (1902).
Moreover, Anglo-Saxonism was also influential in the Spanish-American and South
African Wars in which London and Washington acted as each other’s main—and
arguably only—cheerleaders. The same goes for the Venezuela crisis of 1902-3. What
began as a confrontation between the U.S. and a British-German-Italian coalition ended
up as an opportunity to build the Anglo-American identity against Germany, racialized as
“the Goth and the shamless Hun.” The outcome of the Venezuela crisis might have been
altered: the exceptionalist position might have been victorious in the American foreign
policy debate and so identities other than Anglo-Saxonism might have come to the fore.
Greater Anglo-American conflict would have facilitated the formation of alternative special relationships among great powers/empire, including a counterfactual “Concert of Empires” response to the U.S. victory over Spain in 1898.

Anglo-Saxonism, in this sense, influenced the course of world history. And though Anglo-Saxonism eventually became discredited as a frame for politics, there is little doubt that the turn-of-the-twentieth-century peace between Britain and the U.S. enabled the extraordinarily close and durable forms of cooperation that have come to characterize the AASR in the next hundred years (and counting). Of course, to say that this racist peace subsequently evolved into the AASR is to say that the AASR is a product of a racist past. What other identities subsequently supplanted Anglo-Saxonism—or to what extent has race receded as the anchor of Anglo-American cooperation—should be regarded as the next research avenue.

CONCLUSIONS

The preceding analysis has followed constructivist theoretical approaches which call for an ontologically open approach to the content and contestation of identities within the nation/state unit under study. Rather than hypothesizing on the role and impact of identities such as great power/imperial enmity or liberal democracy, this approach allows us to specify theorize the meanings of the state/national Self within a specific historical context. What is lost in parsimony, I have suggested, is gained in explanatory power. Where I have theoretically departed from constructivist approaches is in the status of human agency. Because discourses are diverse and often internally inconsistent, claims made on behalf of identities are open to critique and argumentation, which, in turn,
influences political outcomes. In theorizing the role of debates, we treat identity as a process, which, in turn, allows us to investigate the questions why some identities change, others persist, and still others turn into long-term institutions.

Following this framework, I have argued that the turn-of-the-twentieth-century peace between Britain and the U.S. was made on the basis of Anglo-Saxonism, a racialized identity which implied the supremacy of Anglo-American elites as the messianic guardians of the humankind. The nature of this identity—both as a wider discourse in society and in terms frames made in foreign policy debates—made the relationship between territoriality and state/national identity at least somewhat contingent. As I have demonstrated in the case of the Venezuela crisis, “race patriotism” easily trumped nationalism. As a result, I have cast doubt on the realist and liberal explanations of the Anglo-American peace fin-de-siècle as a function of appeasement and liberal democracy, respectively. Given that constitutes an important—or, in this case study, dominant—axis of meaning, race has been curiously neglected in the mainstream IR. Behind this absence, arguably, lurks a socio-political “taboo” (Vincent 1981, Doty 1993, Vitalis 2000). This taboo, as the preceding analysis has suggested, may come at a considerable explanatory price. And from a critical standpoint, the taboo is intolerable: how do we justify the neglect of race against the continuing use of equally problematic concepts such nation, civilization or, for that matter, the AASR. The same goes for appeasement or the democratic peace—these are the categories which continue to make an impact on foreign policy communities around the world. For this reason, the task of examining the conditions under which explanations based on these categories succeed and fail constitutes the core of policy-relevant scholarship.


Carnegie, Andrew, “The Venezuelan Question,” North American Review 162 (February 1895), 129-144.


Wilson, Woodrow, “Cleveland as President,” Atlantic Monthly 79 (March 1897), 289–301.
APPENDIX A (Approx 1,000 words)

NOTE: This appendix should be treated as a codebook to a data set (to be taken out of the paper and placed on the author’s website).

The purpose of this appendix is to explain my research choices and sampling strategies, following with a full primary source bibliography. For theoretical reasons explained in the paper, my DA proceeded in three steps, each corresponding to a level of the content and contestation of identity: society, debates and decision. For the texts selected in the first two steps, I relied on two sources: non-fiction bestsellers (below) and newspapers and periodicals. With respect to the latter, I first made my selection based on circulation, region and political orientation (place on the right-left continuum and/or level of “independence”), the dimensions which have been referenced in standard guides on national literatures as well as subject to social historical analysis (these sources were sometimes ranked the “quality” of readership [Review of Reviews, December 30, 1904, pp. 604-5]). Second, I selected one random edition of each media source per month.

On the basis of these two sampling strategies, I generated a basic archive of texts in one of two ways, either using the available electronic, full-text, word-searchable online databases or using a microfilm reader at the British Library Newspapers in London. The resulting newspaper archive was a combination of an electronic sample of The New York Times, Nation and Harper’s, and The Times (London) and a microfilm sample of Literary Digest and Public Opinion (which were particularly useful as they contain summaries of editorials and articles from various regions in both the U.S. and Britain) as well as three British broadsheets: Westminster Gazette, The Manchester Guardian and The Morning Post. The periodicals archive consisted of the Atlantic Monthly, Contemporary Review, Economist, Fortnightly Review, Forum, Harper’s, National Review, Nineteenth Century,
North American Review, Observer, and Review of Reviews. Once again, I kept texts dealing with foreign affairs separate, thus in effect subjecting my archives to two separate DAs. For the last analytical step, I considered texts left by foreign policy officials. These can be loosely grouped into public (party platforms, legislative debates, public memoranda, speeches, and publications by foreign-policy decision-makers dealing with things foreign) and private (correspondences, diaries, and inner government documents such as the memoranda prepared for cabinet meetings, minutes and personal notes – texts that were not publicly available at the time). Both types of sources from this period are available in multiple formats, especially in the U.S. case. I read key British government records at the National Archive at Kew, either in print or the microform.

**Popular non-fiction**


Unpublished Government Records

British Documents: CAB 37/40/54, FO 80/362-474, FO 420/157, FO 881/6710-6745; WO 106/40, B1/5-17 (Venezuela); WO 35/55; 106/40; CAB 8/1 (general).

Published Private and Government Records


