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The Special Relationship

LONDON — Prime Minister Harold Wilson's trip to the United States this week underlines one of the most unwholesome features on the international scene — the special relationship between London and Washington. And, while the odds are against it, the really interesting question is whether the visit can set in motion a retreat from a partnership that has become mutually destructive.

Not very long ago, to be sure, the Anglo-Saxon countries worked together as a model of harmony in the international field. The United States brought its immense and nonimperial power to the service of Britain's 19th Century mission of assuring a freer, richer and more peaceful world. Britain first showed the way and then, long after true leadership had passed, acted to smooth over the rough edges of American power—notably



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in dealing with Asian Communists during the Korean War and at the time of the Geneva settlement in Indochina.

Since then, however, the widening gulf between American strength and British weakness has made partnership impossible. But, because both the White House and, even more, Downing Street have been unwilling to face that fact, the special relationship has dragged on as a sentimental relic. And, being a myth rather than a reality, it has worked to promote the worst features in both British and American behavior.

WASHINGTON, for example, has helped Britain to maintain her independent nuclear deterrent. It has helped to sustain the pound as an international currency. It has prodded Britain to play a world diplomatic and military role, especially east of Suez.

The end result of all these kindnesses is not only that Britain has been encouraged in her deadly temptation to live beyond her means. Worse still, there has been an expectation that, however silly British governments may be and however old-fashioned British management and labor, something will somehow turn up. And that foolish expectation is currently expressed in an economic crisis that has made Britain the sick man of Europe.

Precisely because Britain has become addicted to the drug of American benevolence, London is no longer in a position to exert a moderating influence on American policies in Asia. And nothing shows it better than the three major ventures by Harold Wilson in the realm of Vietnamese diplomacy.

THERE WAS, first, the Commonwealth Prime Minister's mission in June, 1965, just after the end of the first pause in the American bombing of North Vietnam. There was, second, Wilson's

visit to Moscow last February, just after the end of the pause that began at Christmas. Then there was his visit to Moscow last week, just after the bombing of the oil supplies around Hanoi got under way.

Wilson, in other words, has made his most visible efforts to promote negotiation at precisely the moments when success was least likely. Not only have his efforts served to discredit negotiation, but they have also thereby served to justify further escalation.

Given such results, the true purpose of Anglo-American encounters these days should be a gradual unhooking of the special relationship. The obvious way to begin is for the United States to give Britain a shove, possibly in the direction of cutting commitments east of Suez and applying the resources to the project of modernizing Britain's domestic economy.

Unfortunately, however the political conditions that perverted the special relationship in the first place now carry unusual force. As never before, Wilson needs a show of American backing for his economic policies. As never before, Mr. Johnson needs a show of British support for his Vietnamese policies.

Thus, despite the plain evidence of separate and distinct interest, the meeting this week is likely to be only a further waste of time, yielding the usual stuff about harmony and friendship, and prolonging the agony of Anglo-American disentanglement.