

# Casual

## DINING ALONE

There was a time when it was almost fun to confront the Bush-haters and anti-Americans in Britain, where I live. And not only because of my natural love of forensic combat. No, the arguments were fun because my wife, Cita, and I invariably won. Not that we changed any minds, or induced any “I see your point” responses. That would be too much to ask. But we did induce sulking on the part of our adversaries, which was triumph enough.

The best part was that our opponents included not only what the British call the “nutters,” seemingly respectable members of the chattering class—well turned out, well spoken, some with titles—who insist that America and Israel colluded to bring down the World Trade Center; that Bush is a religious fanatic who regularly talks to God and does his bidding (*Go forth, George, and smite the Arabs, and the Iranians, and the North Koreans, and whatever other nation fails to recognize that might makes right*); and that Jewish neoconservatives (or is it Christian fundamentalists?) have captured America’s foreign policy machinery and put it at the service of Ariel Sharon. Understand: These views are not held by people who babble in the street; they are held by many you would not be alarmed to see sitting at the next table in a fine restaurant.

We managed to win over opponents saner than the loony fringe. One might disagree with the American decision to enter Iraq, we would concede, but can anyone dispute that the world is better off without Saddam Hussein in power? And one can argue that we initially messed up the occupation of Iraq, but that doesn’t dictate that we simply pull out, leaving the country in the hands of mur-

derous terrorists eager to establish a new base after the destruction of their base in Afghanistan, does it?

As for Kyoto, yes the president was a bit abrupt in the manner of his refusing to sign the protocol, but the signatories are not meeting the emission quotas to which they agreed, and the world is now looking to America to develop the clean coal technology that will allow China and India to



increase their electricity supplies without melting the icecap and causing such other environmental damage as worries the global-warming crowd. Score one for America.

Then there is Africa. True, our government donates a lower portion of our (massive) GDP to various forms of aid to Africa, but count in private sector giving and Americans come to the top of the donor list. As for trade, the United States may have found it necessary to limit the importation of Chinese bras and a few other items, but our president has offered to attack third-world poverty by ending all trade-distorting agricultural subsidies if other nations do the same. That offer produced a French “non” that leaves America in the vanguard of the free trade movement, and France and

the rest of the E.U. so far to the rear that they are not even in the parade.

All of that was in the glory days—game, set, and match for us in almost every argument: U.S. crime down, violent crime in the U.K. up; U.S. taxes down, U.K. taxes up; U.S. productivity up, U.K. productivity somewhere between flat and falling; U.S. at full employment, or nearly so, E.U. unemployment running in persistent double digits. There’s more, but you get the idea.

That was then, this is now.

The unfortunate fact is that it has become more difficult to defend the Bush administration. Although the United States is making progress in Iraq, at least in putting in place institutions that just might provide a framework for sensible governance, we are not learning as quickly as might have been expected how to pacify the country, restore its infrastructure, and kill the terrorists. The president is unable to focus the resources of a nation that can produce almost 20 million cars and trucks every year, but cannot turn out the armored vehicles and vests our soldiers need to stay alive. The Defense Department cannot figure out how to provide Baghdad with an adequate supply of electricity, preferring its antiquated procurement process to on-the-ground results. Try explaining that away at a London dinner party.

Or try explaining why of all the lawyers in all the law firms in all the world Bush could only find the likes of Harriet Miers to nominate to serve on the Supreme Court. Or try defending the profligate spending that contributes to the imbalances that threaten the world economy, especially when that spending is on what informed Brits now know enough to call “pork.”

It can’t be done. So we dine at home more often, and outfit a new office in Washington to provide a retreat—in both senses of the word.

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