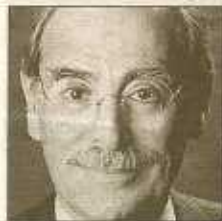


When the ingrates met the hypocrites

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Inept American self-interest and Conservative toadying in Washington make an unedifying mixture



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TONY BLAIR only recently learnt something that his critics say should have been obvious to him for years: gratitude is not a virtue that George W. Bush has in abundance. The Prime Minister decided to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with America in Iraq because he believes it was in Britain's interests to do so: Saddam Hussein was a threat to Britain's security and to world order, and nurturing the special relationship with America is essential to the preservation of Britain's influence in world affairs.

He also believes that Western democracies bear a special burden. Long before Bush signed on to the aggressive foreign policy developed by America's neoconservatives, Blair had pushed for just such a forward thrusting approach to the spread of democracy.

In a speech to an audience in Chicago early in 1999 Blair labelled Saddam Hussein a "dangerous and ruthless" man, argued that genocide "can never be a purely internal matter" and insisted that "armed force is sometimes the

only means of dealing with dictators."

When intervention is required: "We cannot walk away once the fight is over, better to stay with moderate numbers of troops than return for repeat performances with larger numbers."

As the Prime Minister once remarked, when it comes to foreign policy: "Neoconservatism is merely progressive politics by another name."

Blair's decision to stay with the US on Iraq in the face of enormous domestic political opposition was only the latest of his demonstrations of solidarity with America. Before that, and immediately after the attack on the World Trade Centre, he flew to America to offer his condolences at a Mass at St Patrick's Cathedral, and attended a joint session of Congress to demonstrate publicly Britain's determination to join America's War on Terror. Bush pledged eternal gratitude.

And proceeded to ignore Blair's loyalty and his own pledge.

First came steel tariffs, hardly a proper reward for a trading partner's loyalty. Then came the awarding of contracts for the reconstruction of Iraq, a process in which the Bush Administration made no distinction between nations that had supported the German-French onslaught on American

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policies and allies such as Britain and Poland.

There is more of this sort of thing — most lately, cancelling plans to purchase Rolls-Royce engines for new fighter planes and refusing to share sensitive technology with Britain — but you get the idea.

Unfortunately, the Bush Administration has not been content with mere inattention to the commercial interests of its most loyal ally. It has been equally inattentive to the Prime Minister's political interests. For more months than was decent, the White House refused to appoint an Ambassador to Great Britain, denying Blair an on-site spokesman to help to defend the Anglo-American position on Iraq. Then, earlier this month, Bush compounded that felony. The Tories are on a political upswing just as Blair is entering one of the most difficult periods of his tenure in Downing Street, during which he has continued his support for Bush's War on Terror by pushing for longer detention periods for suspected terrorists, identity cards and curbs on glorification of terror. In the excruciatingly difficult trade-off between civil liberties and national security, Blair has come down on the side of security, the Tories on the side of civil liberties. While a top Tory contingent was seeking the prestige that a visit to the White House can confer, their colleagues were voting to make America's War on Terror more difficult, and to embarrass the Prime Minister.

Bush, ignoring that prestige for the Tories can do Blair no good, played

along with what can only be described as Tory hypocrisy.

Messrs Hague, Fox and Osborne were granted audiences with Administration officials, enabling them to claim that the Bush team recognises them as a future government.

At the same time as the Tory front-benchers were cosyng up to the Bush team, they were signalling voters back home that they have no sympathy for Bush's foreign or domestic policies, announcing to the British press (the US

The Administration might be forgiven if the Conservatives were in tune. They aren't

press showed no interest in their visit) that they planned to remonstrate with their American hosts for the Administration's failure to sign the Kyoto protocol, and to chastise the Bush team for its inept handling of the occupation and reconstruction of Iraq. The best of all worlds: recognition by the world's sole superpower, from whose leaders the Tory three then distance themselves lest they antagonise the anti-Bush, anti-war voters to whom the newly liberal Conservatives are appealing.

But it takes two to play that game. The Tories' duplicity is matched only by the Bush Administration's ingratitude. Administration officials received the Tory delegation even though its leader, David Cameron, told the Lib Dems "we both agree" on a host of

issues, including Iraq. At best, he was unaware of the Lib Dems' preference for a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq; at worst, he favours a policy that both the Prime Minister and the President have contended would be a gift to the terrorists.

Of course, the Bush Administration might have been forgiven its insensitivity to Blair's political interests if the visiting Conservatives are as intellectually and politically in tune with their American counterparts as their predecessors once were. But that is far from the case. Bush favours vouchers as a way of improving the education system; Cameron has announced his opposition to such a liberating reform. Bush favours personal healthcare savings accounts as a way to improve the efficiency with which medical care is provided; Cameron specifically rejects the British version, patients' passports, in favour of funnelling more money into the centralised NHS. Bush favours making room in the public square for religion; Cameron does not. Bush instinctively opposes regulations on business; Cameron groups capitalism with communism as two forms of "extremism", and calls for regulation of business to produce more socially responsible behaviour.

Harry Truman once said that, if you want a friend in Washington, buy a dog. Americans who appreciate what Blair has meant to the Anglo-American relationship hope that Bush's ingratitude does not send the Prime Minister or his successors shopping for a French poodle or a dachshund.