

# STOCK RESPONSES

Those who want to criticise Britain's relationship with America will have to do better than rely on knee-jerk responses, argues Simon Titley

There's a story British people like to tell about Americans. When Alan Bennett's play 'The Madness of George III' was made into a film, it had to be re-titled 'The Madness of King George', otherwise American audiences would assume it was a sequel and wonder why they hadn't seen parts one and two.

It's a funny story but it's untrue. Its significance is not what it says about Americans but what it says about us. We have prejudices about Americans and express these through stock responses. The political issue of Britain's relationship with the USA has become acute but, if we want to develop a coherent policy, we must try harder than this.

The 'King George' story illustrates our key prejudice about Americans, that they are stupid people. A specific British prejudice is that Americans "lack irony", even though Americans produced 'The Simpsons', 'Seinfeld' and Woody Allen's movies. We can see no irony in criticising George W Bush's mangling of the English language, when we have our own world-class mangler in John Prescott.

The USA is a complex, multi-faceted society and, if we are honest, our feelings about America are mixed. If you know many Americans, you will know they are unusually open and friendly people. If you work in any academic field, you will know that American intellectuals lead the thinking in many spheres. You probably enjoy many aspects of American culture, such as music and films.

At the same time, you may despise American fast food, multinational corporations, excessive consumption and pollution and, above all, the Bush administration. The thing is, so do many Americans. In each of these categories of loathing, it is Americans themselves who are leading the opposition.

The country where fundamentalists flock to Wal-Mart to buy apocalyptic novels is also where the publishing sensation of 2002 was Michael Moore's 'Stupid White Men'. The country that guzzles 25% of the world's oil is also home to one of the world's most effective environmental actions, Ariana Huffington's campaign against 'sports utility vehicles'. And, lest we forget, half a million more Americans voted for Al Gore than George W. Bush.

So, when we are developing policy as opposed to cracking jokes, we need to be clear what we mean when we talk about 'America' and 'Americans'. We need to distinguish between things that are merely differences, things we happen not to like and things that actually matter.

What matters is where Britain's future belongs. The most important issue in British foreign policy is Britain's increasing failure to reconcile its relationships with the

USA and the EU. The conflict with Iraq has brought this simmering crisis to the boil.

Since the 1950s, successive governments have pursued the idea that Britain could form a 'bridge' across the Atlantic. Some (especially the French) always viewed this policy with suspicion. So long as the Cold War persisted, Britain got away with it, because a perceived common threat from the Soviet Union obscured any differences between allies.

Once the cement of the Soviet threat crumbled, it was inevitable that differences would emerge. Throughout the 1990s, the differences that caused problems between the US and Europe tended to be about subjective interests rather than objective values, principally trade disputes. Anyone who thinks the problem started with 'W' should remember the fuss Clinton made about bananas.

And here's the clue to where we have been going wrong in our assessments of the USA. Alan Clark once remarked perceptively that the mistake pro-American British politicians made was to assume the USA had objective interests. They took the cant about freedom and democracy at face value, and never realised that American policy is the outcome of domestic lobbying by subjective interests.

What Clark didn't point out is that America's critics make an equivalent mistake. The death penalty, gun culture and creationism are the type of issues that condition anti-American perceptions in Britain. But the significant thing about these policies, grotesque though they seem to us, is that they are also the products of lobbying by vested interests. We mistake them for the products of objective values because that's how our own system of party politics works.

While voter turnouts are lower in the USA than in Europe, there is a much higher level of citizen action in the form of lobbying, petitions and various types of grassroots participation. It ought to make for a much healthier political culture than ours, except that it is prone to money.

The weak point in the American political system is the role of 'campaign finance'. The cost of running for office in any significant contest is enormous, mainly because of the cost of TV advertising. A single candidate for the US Senate typically spends more than is spent in a British general election by all the parties and candidates combined. It is effectively impossible for anyone to run for major office without the financial backing of business interests.

Short electoral terms and the added burden of primary elections makes US politics a never-ending round of fundraising. And the money comes with strings attached. Bernie Ecclestone would have had no trouble

in America. It is considered quite acceptable for business interests to make campaign donations conditional on support for a certain line. It's the best politics money can buy.

For their part, the politicians (who, unlike their European counterparts, do not stand on an ideological platform) are quite happy to endorse whatever their financial backers demand, and may even shamelessly award their votes to the highest bidder. It is why, in Washington DC, campaign finance is the most important weapon in a professional lobbyist's armoury.

Understanding this political dynamic, the combination of corporate money and grassroots power, is vital to understanding American foreign policy. It is widely assumed by America's critics that oil interests are behind the war on Iraq. In a way, they are. Most senior figures in the Bush administration have close links with the oil industry. Ensuring supplies of oil from the Middle East and Central Asia is central to American geopolitical concerns.

But this policy would not be possible without the American people. It is only because most Americans are highly dependent on their cars and addicted to cheap petrol that the political power of the oil industry is possible. Without the domestic consumer demand, the oil industry would have little political clout.

Apologists for American policy may regard this process as democratic. In reality, it is what economist Fred Hirsch called "the tyranny of small choices," the collective outcome of individual decisions with no collective intent.

These consumers inhabit a country almost impervious to outside influence. Only about 10% of Americans has passports. Less than 1% of the content of American network TV is foreign-sourced. If you have ever been to America, you will have noticed the almost complete absence of foreign news on TV.

Most Americans neither know nor care about the outside world; in this respect, their President is representative. If they think about the outside world at all, it is largely in terms of stereotypes. Again, if you have ever visited America, you will know that the first thing most Americans want to ask you about is the royal family; it is the only thing their TV ever shows about us.

When foreigners are perceived variously as theme park Ruritians, dangerous terrorists or Stone Age savages, it is easy to see how a climate of opinion is created in which foreigners have no legitimate interests. The first step to denying equal dignity to other people is never to meet them. Isolation and ignorance help underpin a foreign policy based on a ruthless pursuit of perceived national interest.

Atlanticism is no longer a credible foreign policy for Britain, if it ever was. British politicians flatter themselves with references to the 'special relationship', but this relationship is special only to one side. America has shown no recent signs of reciprocating.

Even after September 11th, the US government again refused to declare Noraid a terrorist organisation, and has done nothing to stem the flow of money and weapons from so-called 'Irish-Americans' to paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. And if we want to know how 'special' the American government really thinks we are, ask any British steelworker or farmer about US trade sanctions.

The most astonishing act of American disloyalty to its allies, however, is the 'American Servicemembers' Protection Act' (ASPA). Remarkably, it received little media attention in Europe. It is a new law, passed by the US House and Senate in July 2002 and signed by President Bush, that authorises the military invasion of the International Criminal Court headquarters in the Netherlands, to free any US nationals detained by the Court. It seems so ridiculous I will say it again. The US has passed a law authorising an invasion of the Netherlands, a NATO ally and an EU member. The act is contrary not only to the NATO treaty but also international law. Above all, it is an act of contempt.

It is widely assumed that the problem is the

consequence of a right-wing Republican administration, and things will get better once the Democrats get back into the saddle. I am not so sure. In a political system where policy is an outcome of corporate lobbying, it makes little difference which side is notionally in charge.

The Clinton administration was just as aggressive on trade policy and just as ruthless in its use of the World Trade

Organisation on behalf of corporate interests. The contempt of the Bush administration for international organisations and treaties at least has the merit of honesty.

When Britain considers where its interests lie, it must think in terms of common interests. There will be times when our interests genuinely coincide with those of the USA and it is then desirable to form ad hoc alliances. On a personal level, we can continue to enjoy aspects of American culture and friendships with individual Americans. But it is not possible to maintain a close permanent alliance with a country whose foreign policy is driven by self-interested lobbies and is also much more powerful than us.

I have never understood how British Eurosceptics have got away with criticising the EU on the grounds of loss of sovereignty, while never criticising our loss of sovereignty to American corporate power.

Britain's future is in Europe because, however imperfect the EU may be, it provides a forum in which we can express common interests and a partnership in which we have some say. The EU's greatest achievement is often forgotten – it has made war less likely. Blair's policy of hanging on to American coat-tails will give us the worst of all worlds – isolation, no influence and tears before bedtime.

