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HEADLINE: THE **ABSENCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY** IN AMERICA

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BODY:

A strange feeling overtakes the British journalist in Washington these days, as he chronicles the rebirth of the imperial presidency under George Bush, and then turns for a second to CNN, to watch Tony Blair defending himself at Prime Minister's Questions. Mere theatrics, I tell myself as I watch the heated exchanges. Entertaining to be sure, but only a charade that passes for open government, where questioning by the people's elected representatives elicits few facts and certainly changes no policies.

Like many others in my trade, I was brought up to believe in the superiority of the American system, with its vaunted checks and balances. A Congress with powerful investigative committees and a press unhampered by restrictive libel laws and a stifling Official Secrets Act - that, not a weekly bun fight in the Commons, was what was needed to hold the country's rulers accountable. Or is it? What is so striking in America right now is the **absence of accountability**. The administration has led the country into an unprovoked war against a sovereign foreign state for reasons that were certainly overstated and quite possibly deliberately mendacious. It has mistreated detainees after 11 September with a disregard for basic civil rights that worries the inspector general of Mr Bush's own justice department. But look not to Capitol Hill for remedies.

Those committees, with their sweeping subpoena powers? As they say in polite New York circles, "fuggedaboutit". First of all, the Republicans who control the White House also have majorities in both chambers of Congress - and thus in the committees of Congress. If push comes to shove, Republican senators and congressmen will make sure that no great embarrassment befalls a popular Republican president and his senior officials. And these latter know it.

Donald Rumsfeld deals with questions in the manner of an aged bull, idly swatting away flies with his tail on a warm summer day. Or take John Ashcroft, the attorney general, who on the very day the inspector general's report appeared, breezily informed the house judiciary committee that he wanted even more draconian powers to fight terrorism. A Justice Department spokesman commented, apropos of the report, "We make no apologies for using every legal measure to protect the security of the American people." There you have it: national security, in whose name all is permitted, nothing has to be explained, and no one need provide a serious account of their behaviour.

The powerful armed services and intelligence committees of the Senate are said to be planning joint hearings on the WMD mystery, but don't hold your breath. The really tricky

parts, you may be sure, will be addressed at closed hearings, or omitted altogether on the grounds of - what else? - national security.

Admittedly, these are unusual times. But they only underline the extraordinary latitude enjoyed by a president even in normal times. George Bush does not have to face an American equivalent of Prime Minister's Questions. But even if he did, his modest debating skills would not seriously be tested, given the institutional reverence for his office that no British prime minister dare dream of.

Only briefly, in the final stages of a presidential campaign, when the party out of power has nominated its candidate, does the US system provide for an organised opposition with a single leader. Today, the Democrats are especially ineffectual, divided over Iraq and cowed by an aggressive, lavishly financed White House machine, and their energies are diluted by the nine candidates vying to challenge Mr Bush in 2004.

Fine, but what about the press? After all in Britain, has not the equally enfeebled and divided Tory party been to a large degree supplanted by the press in providing opposition to the Labour juggernaut? That has not been the case in the US. Forget the small matter that the most influential media organisation in the country, The New York Times, has had other problems of late. Far more important, Mr Bush, who dislikes the press, does all he can to avoid engagement. From time to time, he tosses a few crumbs to the famished pack; the odd condescending answer to shouted questions at a photo-op, or a stilted appearance with a visiting foreign leader, when half of the little time available is taken up by interpreters.

Sadly, the lack of engagement is reciprocated. Buoyed by the apparent success of his Middle East trip, Mr Bush talked this week for three-quarters of an hour with pool reporters on Air Force One. But, according to the transcript, he was not asked a single question about those missing Iraqi weapons.

To be sure, this is among the most intimidating and best-run White Houses in memory, swift to punish those who displease it. But the journalists do not advance their cause, failing to follow up each other's questions and allowing the subject to be changed. Oh for an American Jeremy Paxman to ask Ari Fleischer, Mr Bush's maddeningly bland spokesman, the same pointed question 14 times in succession. The White House deals with the press as it deals with Europe: divide et impera.

The policy, it must be said, is working brilliantly. But it does not hide the sorry truth that all the vaunted firepower of America's Congress and America's press right now do not add up to 30 minutes of weekly pyrotechnics at Westminster.

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