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Hague 'Paves the Way' for Bush-Cameron Meeting

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The Conservative leader, David Cameron, is to meet the US president, George Bush, later this year, William Hague said today, as he arrived in Washington for a series of reconciliatory meetings with US Republicans.

Mr Hague, the shadow foreign secretary, said his trip - accompanied by George Osborne, the shadow chancellor, and Liam Fox, the shadow defence secretary - would "pave the way" for a trip to the White House later this year by Mr Cameron.

That will mark a rapprochement since the leadership of Michael Howard, who criticised post-war US action in Iraq, and was then reportedly told by Mr Bush's chief of staff, Karl Rove, to "not bother" coming to Washington.

Mr Hague will himself today give a speech partially critical of the US, in the light of the release of further photographs of US torture in Iraqi prisons in 2003.

He will tell the Centre for Transatlantic Relations in a speech tonight that such events have "undermined goodwill towards the US" and that "certain lessons must be learnt".

"Reports of prisoner abuse by British and American troops - however isolated - and accounts, accurate or not, of the mistreatment of detainees at Guantanamo and extraordinary rendition flights leading to the torture of suspects, have led to a critical erosion in our moral authority.

"This has resulted in a loss of goodwill towards America which could be as serious in the long term as the sharpest of military defeats."

In guarded language - in a speech which otherwise celebrates the "special relationship" between London and Washington - Mr Hague goes on to warn the US to respect the "rule of law", saying: "We therefore must not forget that the most important quality of democracy, which we are trying to spread today in Iraq and elsewhere, is respect for the rule of law. In standing up for the rule of law, we must be careful not to employ methods that undermine it. To do so would be to set a poor example to those who look to the western world for leadership, and would undermine our achievements among emerging and new democracies."

Mr Hague's warns his audience of a spate of recent polls in Europe positing the US as the "greatest threat to international security", something he calls "ludicrous and shocking ... [but] true".

He says: "The undermining of goodwill towards the US cause is particularly alarming since the war on terror is not remotely won. Indeed it seems to be the case that international terrorist networks based around revolutionary fundamentalist Islam are currently gaining recruits rather than losing them."

He adds that the US and UK must remain close allies in a world which could soon see a nuclear-armed Iran, continuing violence in Afghanistan, an unstable Iraq, the stalling of the Israeli-Palestinian peace and major instability in one of the west's "major" Arab allies - possibly all at the same time.

Mr Hague also spells out the "mistakes" the US made in Iraq. While still supporting the war, he says that "more ground troops were needed ... to secure the peace, and it was evidently a mistake to disband the Iraqi army so early".

As reported previously, Mr Hague will use Mr Bush's admission in his state of union address that the US was "addicted to oil" to urge America to offer "sustained leadership" on tackling climate change. Dr Fox, who is addressing the rightwing Heritage Foundation today, will urge Mr Bush not to scale back his commitment to the Anglo-American Joint Strike Fighter programme for a new generation of military jets.

Dr Fox will warn that failure to press ahead with the JSF model designed for the Royal Navy's planned new aircraft carriers would undermine British confidence in the "special relationship" with America.

And he will urge Mr Bush to save a £1.4bn project involving Britain's Rolls-Royce to develop an alternative engine for the JSF, which the president scrapped from his budget for 2007.

Speaking to the Heritage Foundation thinktank, Dr Fox will warn that Labour's "deviousness" over the evidence for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq had already "gravely undermined" the British public's trust in the special relationship.