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The Bush Presidency: Transition to Crisis Leadership

Mayer, J.; Rozell, M.J.; Wilxoc, C.

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The Bush Presidency: Transition to Crisis Leadership

Jeremy Mayer and Clyde Wilcox

Georgetown University

Mark J. Rozell

The Catholic University of America

Abstract

George W. Bush won the presidency by the narrowest and most contested margin since 1876. He launched his presidency after a dramatically shortened transition, and facing a deeply divided nation. Despite his lack of legitimacy in the eyes of many voters, Bush sought to govern as though he had a mandate, and succeeded in passing a large tax cut in the first months of his presidency. His White House staff won plaudits for its professionalism, and his conservative base offered continuing support, but by the end of the summer of 2001 his support was waning. The attacks of 9-11-01 presented Bush with new obstacles and opportunities. Bush eventually inspired the nation and successfully led a brief war against the Taliban. However, after an extraordinary ride of popularity in the polls, Bush now confronts a rapidly declining stock market, unprecedented corporate scandals, the possibility of a new recession, and the question of whether to make war on Iraq, despite a lack of support from key allies and no obvious justification in international law.

1 Introduction

On December 12, 2000, a deeply divided U.S. Supreme Court ordered a halt to the recounting of votes in Florida, assuring that George W. Bush would be the 43rd president of the United States. From the start, Bush faced unprecedented challenges. His victory was the narrowest in well over a century, and a majority of Democrats doubted that he would have won if the recount had been permitted to proceed. Bush's party controlled both branches of Congress, but the margins were narrower than at any time in modern politics.

Because of the long delay in deciding the outcome of the 2000 election, Bush also enjoyed the shortest transition period in the history of the modern presidency. No funds from the Presidential Transition Act could be used, and none of the office space set aside for the transition could be occupied until the outcome of the election was settled in early December. This meant that Bush

had to staff his administration and prepare to govern in little more than half the usual time. To help overcome this deficit, Bush established a privately funded transition operation.

Bush thus began his presidency without an electoral mandate, strong congressional majorities, impressive popular support, or even time to prepare his staff and policies. His experience in public office was quite limited, and his dislike of the details of public policy well known. Only a narrow majority of voters thought that he had the knowledge and ability to serve as president, particularly in a crisis. His signature campaign slogan, 'compassionate conservatism' was vague and little understood, and his signature campaign promise, to cut taxes, was not strongly supported by the people.

By October 2001, however, Bush's approval ratings were higher than any president in history, narrowly surpassing his father's ratings in the Gulf War. The terrorist attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001 totally restructured the political landscape, and transformed the Bush agenda from tax cuts and education to national security and an international war on terrorism. The president's handling of the early months of the war on terror elicited praise from Democrats and Republicans alike. But by the fall of 2002 Bush's popularity was in decline, and it struggled to justify its domestic policies and to build support for a war with Iraq – which has the power to make or break his presidency.

Presidents are usually evaluated as administrators, as policy advocates, as national leaders, and as politicians. In this contribution we will examine Bush's record in each area through the end of September 2002.

2 The president as administrator: grown-ups hiding secrets from the kids

The transition period is a crucial time for new presidents. They must choose a White House staff that will offer critical political and substantive advice and help the administration achieve its goals. They must nominate and win confirmation for the cabinet officials who will oversee the bureaucracy and help promote the president's policies.

In hindsight, the selection of Richard B. Cheney as the Republican vice-presidential nominee was perhaps Bush's best appointment. Cheney was in some ways an unconventional choice, since he came from a state that the Republicans were bound to win, but his experience in Washington and in national security fill significant gaps in Bush's qualifications. His long years of high offices – as a Republican leader in the House of Representatives, as Chief of Staff to President Gerald Ford and then Secretary of Defense for George H. W. Bush – made him the obvious choice to take on the vital task of running

Bush's transition. Perhaps because of Cheney's competent professionalism, the Bush administration ran one of the smoothest transitions in modern times, despite the long delay caused by the election controversy. Bush had his key staff all in place by January 4, 2001, a remarkable achievement given the hurdles faced by his administration. By contrast, even with the benefit of a full transition period, President Bill Clinton did not have his key staff appointed until one week prior to the January 20, 1993 inauguration. As Dunn Tenpas and Hess (2002: 584-5) report, "President Bush benefited from his predecessors' mistakes. His transition and first days seemed like a cakewalk compared to the unrelenting criticism faced by President Clinton. Assembling a staff of seasoned veterans in less than fifty days is no small feat."

Of course, Bush had one clear advantage over Clinton: a pool of talented and able Republicans with executive branch experience. When Clinton took office in 1992, the Republicans had controlled the White House for 20 of the preceding 24 years, giving Clinton the choice of untested appointees or veterans of the much criticized Carter administration. By contrast, the Bush White House staff and cabinet are notable for their experience and professionalism. Indeed, the administration has sought to portray itself as an administration of 'grown ups', to draw a contrast to the early days of the Clinton administration, which veteran *Washington Post* reporter David Broder once compared to "coming home and finding that your kids got into the liquor cabinet" (Maltese 2000: 202).

The president sought out experienced and savvy Washington insiders for key positions. The White House chief of staff manages the White House and coordinates the flow of information. Bush's two most recent predecessors had chosen poorly for this position. Bush's father chose a politician, the pugnacious former New Hampshire Governor John Sununu, whose actions and comments proved a constant problem for the administration. Bill Clinton initially appointed the congenial but administratively weak Mack McLarty as chief of staff. Both Sununu and McLarty lacked sufficient Washington experience to be effective in the role of chief of staff and each was ultimately replaced in that position. Andrew Card, Bush's chief of staff, had served as a deputy chief of staff in the former Bush White House, as Secretary of Transportation, and as the head of the 2000 Republican National Convention. Although Card has suggested that he may soon depart the administration to return to private life, his tenure so far has been marked by high praises for administrative competence and efficiency.

Bush's lack of experience in foreign policy was obvious during the campaign, but his administration has deep experience in the international realm. Condoleezza Rice, the National Security Adviser (NSA), had served as a chief aid to the NSA in the former Bush presidency. Secretary of State Colin Powell had also served as NSA for Ronald Reagan, and as chair of the

military's Joint Chiefs during the first Bush administration. Bush's Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had held that same post in the Ford administration. In addition to the impressive résumés of Bush's team as individuals, the key players in the Bush White House, including Cheney, have experience working together as a team, something that is lacking at the start of most presidencies.

The White House staff and cabinet reflected a balancing of political interests. Bush had interpreted his father's defeat in 1992 as a sign that no Republican president could afford to antagonize the right wing of the party. George H.W. Bush was weakened in 1992 by an intra-party challenge from commentator Patrick Buchanan, and his son has been determined to maintain his political support among conservatives. Bush has appointed more conservatives to the administration than even Ronald Reagan did. Senior political analyst Karl Rove represents the views of movement conservatives in the White House. Christian conservatives are especially happy with the appointment of former Senator John Ashcroft as Attorney General. Ashcroft has organized voluntary bible reading in the Justice Department, challenged socially liberal state laws in court, and been a consistent advocate of pro-gun policies. Gale Norton, the Secretary of Interior, is very popular with conservatives and reviled by environmentalists.

Yet Bush did not give the right all that it wanted – he rejected the conservative movement's preferred nominee for the Defense Department. He also became the first Republican president to name an openly gay person to an executive post, when he nominated Scott Evertz to head the Office of National AIDS policy. Although the appointment of Evertz and another gay man to an ambassadorship did provoke some criticism from social conservatives, the overall Bush record on appointments was one that pleased most conservatives. Even when Bush nominated such high profile pro-choice Republicans as Powell and Christie Todd Whitman (Secretary of the Environmental Protection Agency), he deftly kept them away from positions dealing with abortion directly.

The administration is remarkably diverse. Only six of the 15 cabinet members are white men; three appointees are women (Ann Veneman, Department of Agriculture, Gale Norton Department of Interior, and Christie Todd Whitman at EPA); two are black (Colin Powell at State and Roderick Paige, Department of Education); one is an Arab-American (Spencer Abraham, Department of Energy); one is Asian-American (Norman Mineta at Transportation, also a Democrat who had been Secretary of Commerce in the Clinton Administration); and one is Hispanic (Mel Martinez at Housing and Urban Development). As presidential scholar James Pfiffner (2002: 457) writes, "The diversity of the cabinet reflected both the increasingly qualified pool of minorities in the United States and the signal that Bush wanted to send to draw minority voters from the Democratic

to the Republican Party." The diversity, however, was not economic, as the cabinet contained more millionaires and tycoons than any in American history (Borger 2001). Almost every Bush cabinet member stood to benefit from the president's proposed elimination of the estate tax, a tax affecting the wealthiest 1-2 per cent of Americans.

The administration paid special attention to the press office, which is charged with articulating and controlling the president's message to the media. The administration has done a remarkable job in controlling its message, and in keeping internal dissension out of the public eye. Only recently – on a possible war with Iraq and on the high profile role of Attorney General Ashcroft – have dissidents within the administration leaked their opposition to the press. For reporters who write the 'first draft' of presidential history and influence public perceptions, the operation of the press office is the most visible indicator of an administration's governing competence. A chaotic, undisciplined press office creates the image of a chaotic and undisciplined administration. The media perception of the press office thus carries enormous weight for how reporters and therefore the rest of the country view an administration.

The remarkable discipline of the Bush administration is coupled with an almost obsessive concern for secrecy. Bush has sought to deny scholars and other citizens access to presidential papers from past administrations that are scheduled for release under the Presidential Records Act. In so doing, Bush issued a controversial executive order that sought to expand the scope of the legal principle of executive privilege – the right of presidents to withhold information from congress, the courts, and ultimately the public (Rozell 2002). Public interest, journalistic and academic groups are preparing a legal challenge to Bush's action. His administration has fought the release of documents about the meetings between Cheney and oil company lobbyists as the administration designed its energy policy – resulting in the first congressional subpoena of administration documents in the Bush presidency. Perhaps the most remarkable act of secrecy was the planning for the reorganization of the bureaucracy to coordinate the war on terrorism, announced in June 2002. The planning was kept secret from congressional leaders including the Republican party leaders in both chambers of congress, and indeed from cabinet secretaries affected by the reorganization. Cheney and others in the administration argue that this new executive secrecy is a reassertion of presidential powers lost since Watergate, powers they see as necessary for effective presidential decision-making. If the Bush administration wins its confrontations with Congress and the media over secrecy, this will have long-lasting effects on the balance of power between the president and other power centers.

Bush, the first president to hold a Master's in Business Administration, won strong praise for the discipline and competence of his team, particularly in his first year in office. However, by autumn 2002, critics were emerging, who saw administrative disarray on the war on terror and on Mideast policy. Leaks increased in frequency, and the internal debates about a potential war with Iraq were evident to the public. The comparison with Clinton is again instructive. Clinton began with a White House quickly famed for its inability to meet deadlines, make decisions, focus on a coherent agenda, or keep secrets. After two years in office, however, Clinton's White House began to do each of those core tasks more effectively. The trajectory of Bush's administrative reputation among Washington insiders is moving in the opposite direction, although the criticism has not reached the levels experienced by Clinton.

3 The president as policy advocate: a fast start, but slowing down the stretch

The two major party candidates in the 2000 presidential election – Bush and Democratic nominee Al Gore differed on many issues. When Bush lost the popular vote to Gore and won a contested victory in the Electoral College, and when the Democrats gained seats in the House and moved to a tie in the Senate, many observers expected that he would compromise on his policy agenda. Some European journalists asked whether Bush might even consider a coalition government. Instead, Bush moved aggressively to pursue his policy agenda, behaving as though he had won a mandate in the election.

3.1 The domestic agenda: before and after

Bush's first priority was a massive tax cut, and it provided him with his most important domestic policy victory. The most widely remembered broken promise of modern presidential politics was George H.W. Bush's "Read my lips, no new taxes," and George W. Bush was determined not to make the same mistake. His campaign essentially adopted a wish-list tax cut package that congressional Republicans had offered in 2000 to force a presidential veto, and once in office Bush moved quickly to make this his central priority. Like Reagan, he honed in on this issue with great intensity, hoping to avoid the problems that faced the Clinton administration when it lost control of the agenda in 1993.

The tax cut package that Bush proposed was remarkable for both its size and its regressive structure. Although many economists favored a tax cut to stimulate the economy in 2000, few supported such deep cuts. Indeed, in order to make the revenue loss estimates palatable, the White House and Congress agreed to phase in the cuts slowly, and then to phase them out abruptly. By reducing the revenue loss to zero after a decade, the size of the cuts was made to appear smaller than it was, a move labeled irresponsible by a number of tax experts. The tax package was regressive in that it included the end to the estate tax – a tax first signed into law by Republican icon President Theodore Roosevelt – that affected only the richest Americans but produced billions of dollars in revenue.

The tax cut package sailed through the House of Representatives so quickly that one Democratic staffer quipped that the members had not had time to count the pages, much less the revenue loss. In the Senate, however, Bush was forced to bargain for Democratic votes while working to keep moderate Republicans from defecting. In the end, the Senate adopted a bill close to that of the House. In many ways, the tax package was a remarkable victory for Bush. There was little public demand for such deep cuts, and many economists and moderates in both parties worried that it would turn what were then budget surpluses into deficits. The Bush administration's focus was noteworthy, particularly given all of the opposition to the proposal, the lack of public enthusiasm for it, and the president's lack of an electoral mandate. Yet the effort to win on the tax cut eventually cost the Republicans control of the U.S. Senate.

Following the tax cut passage the Democrats unexpectedly gained a Senate majority because of the defection of a GOP Senator, and the rest of Bush's domestic agenda fared far less well. Bush had campaigned on a promise to be an education advocate, and his plans included national testing of students, vouchers for parents sending their children to private schools, and the withdrawal of federal funds from school districts where students did poorly. Bush was able to win support for some limited federal testing, but not for withdrawal of funds from failing school districts or vouchers. His proposals for allowing religious institutions to receive federal funds to perform certain social welfare functions collapsed when evangelical Christian leaders balked at giving such funds to non-Christian churches, and at any federal control over the use of the monies. Bush's energy bill stalled in the U.S. Senate as environmentalists objected to his plans to drill for oil in Arctic wildernesses and coastal waters.

Bush's boldest campaign gesture had been to tackle the looming problem with social security, a national pension program. As the baby boomers retire the program will run huge deficits, and Bush proposed to remedy this problem by allowing workers to create their own personal retirement accounts

and therefore control the investment of their own retirement funds. The government would thus lower its guaranteed payout at retirement. Facing stiff opposition from Democrats and retired citizens, Bush chose to appoint a commission to study the problem. He stacked the committee with those supportive of his proposals, thereby guaranteeing that the committee's report would be taken less seriously. The Bush team remains committed to this proposal, but due to fear that it would hurt Republicans in the midterm elections, the plan has been put off until 2003. The public's mood has also shifted with the sharp decline in the stock market; guaranteed government payments safe from market fluctuations look a lot better to many Americans today than during the stock market boom years.

On social and moral issues, Bush has generally, but not always, satisfied social conservatives. One of Bush's first acts as president was to sign a series of executive orders relating to abortion. In one example, he prohibited the use of federal funding for international agencies to discuss abortion as an option in family planning. His policy on stem cell research and cloning made social conservatives moderately happy – he proposed a ban on all human cloning research, and proposed limiting public funds to lines of stem cells already available to researchers. They were disappointed when Bush appointed a few gays to high office, and when he quickly dropped educational vouchers from his education reform package.

By late summer 2001, the Bush administration's domestic agenda had stalled. In an effort to recapture the initiative Bush proposed deep cuts in business taxes to stimulate the economy, but Democrats argued that any tax cuts should go to working families to stimulate demand. Despite its impressively credentialed staff, the administration appeared to be out of new ideas. Bush's job approval ratings declined to just barely above 50 per cent in the national Gallup Poll.

The September 11th attacks almost totally refocused the Bush administration's domestic policy. In an effort to rally the country to a unified response Bush put his partisan agenda on hold in order to mount a domestic and foreign response. He compromised relatively quickly with Senate Democrats over proposals to offset the economic problems caused by the attacks (Bush had asked for help for companies but not workers), and moved to coordinate the domestic response and expand the investigative powers of the executive branch.

The administration arrested an unknown number of individuals who it suspected of involvement with terrorists. At the time of this writing, many of these individuals remain in detention, often without access to attorneys. In June 2002 the Justice Department announced the arrest of a man suspected of plotting an attack on Washington, D.C., and asserted the right to hold him indefinitely without bringing charges because he was an enemy of the state.

This claim will eventually be tested in the courts, setting important precedents for future presidents.

Bush moved to coordinate domestic security operations in a non-cabinet level Department of Homeland Security, and appointed Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge as its head. Ridge was a decorated Vietnam War veteran and an innovative governor, but his post lacked cabinet stature, which made his tasks even more difficult. Democrats in the Senate proposed a cabinet-level department, and the Bush administration spent months denying the necessity of this move. Then in June 2002 Bush proposed a similar reorganization plan to better coordinate intelligence and federal law enforcement efforts in the future.

The administration asked for substantial expansions of government investigative powers, including the power to wiretap cell phones and intercept e-mail. Congress responded quickly, but a bipartisan group of members insisted on a 'sunset clause' that would terminate these additional powers after four years unless Congress agreed that they were still necessary.

3.2 The foreign policy agenda: from unilateralism to a global war on terrorism

During the campaign, Bush's major foreign policy promises were to pull out of the Kyoto accords on global warming, and to end the anti-ballistic treaty with the Soviet Union. He followed through on both promises, and although both of these policies were largely unpopular in Europe they attracted little attention from the American public. Few Americans knew of the Kyoto accords, and Bush's publicly cozy relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin eased any concerns that ending the ABM treaty would lead to an arms race.

The most striking difference between Bush's early foreign policy and that of his father and of Bill Clinton was its unilateral focus. The administration asserted the right of the U.S. to act to defend its national interests, no matter what damage it might cause to relations with allies or non-allied countries. But all of this changed with the September 11th attacks. The Bush administration sought cooperation from allies in Europe, in the Middle East and around the rest of the world. The administration has worked closely with many governments in an effort to identify and contain terrorists. However, the go-it-alone attitude resurfaced in the conduct of the war, and the treatment of captured Al-Qaeda members. Many European allies were particularly unhappy with Bush's initial refusal to abide by the Geneva Convention, one of the oldest and most revered international laws, in regard to prisoners. The administration has most recently asserted the right to take unilateral preemptive military action against potential enemies.

In the fall of 2002 the administration seemed divided over whether to seek allies in a potential war with Iraq, or to wage war alone. The State Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were pushing for a broad alliance such as Bush's father had built during his war with Iraq, and several former officials in the earlier Bush administration urged multilateral action. But many hawks in the administration seemed bent on going it alone, and by September it appeared possible that the administration would risk alienating even Germany and Britain in pursuit of the war.

The president at war. "We will not waver, we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail." With these starkly simple words of resolve, President Bush launched 'Operation Enduring Freedom' on October 7, 2001. The Taliban government had rejected Bush's ultimatum of September 20th, and the president wasted little time in bringing the full weight of America's vast military might on the comparatively tiny forces of Afghanistan. Bush, who had less foreign policy experience than almost any chief executive in the last 50 years when he was inaugurated, had ably gathered America's allies, and even rallied the partial support or at least acquiescence of some traditional American opponents such as China, Russia and Iran.

President Bush, both in his September 20th speech to Congress and in his speech announcing hostilities with Afghanistan, warned that the war on terrorism would not be a bloodless distant war, that it would involve U.S. casualties. However, the Bush battle plan showed a keen awareness that Americans prefer to win wars with minimal U.S. casualties. The war featured a relentless air attack on Taliban forces, which became much more effective when special forces arrived to help direct the strikes. The ground war relied primarily on the forces of the Northern Alliance, the domestic opponents of the Taliban, with heavy U.S. logistic support and significant military aid.

At first the Northern Alliance fought poorly, retreating more than it advanced. The Bush administration encountered sharp domestic criticism, especially in the media. "The United States is not headed into a quagmire; it's already in one" argued Jacob Heilbrun of the *Los Angeles Times* (Mayer 2002: 20) "This is a war in trouble," opined Daniel Schorr of National Public Radio (idem: 20). Some in the media felt that Bush's strategy was too cautious, and unlikely to succeed against the hardened Taliban forces.

Bush stayed the course, refusing to order a large-scale ground invasion of Afghanistan as demanded by some of his critics. By December 18, scarcely six weeks after the war began, U.S.-supported troops had marched into Kabul and brought down the Taliban. The Northern Alliance, which had controlled barely ten per cent of the country on September 11, had triumphed with remarkable speed. Bush had won a victory with even fewer U.S. casualties than his father's triumph over Saddam Hussein in 1991. While Bush

cautioned that the war against terror was far from over, and that Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups still operated around the world, it was clear that Bush and his military team had won a victory much quicker than many in America and abroad had anticipated.

The victory over the Taliban left the administration unsure of its next steps, however. The administration has been surprisingly reluctant to engage in nation building in Afghanistan, despite strong pleas by leaders in the region to avoid a power vacuum in the country. The apparent escape of Osama Bin Laden and several of his top aides was an obvious disappointment to the administration.

At the time of writing, in September 2002, the administration is deeply divided on whether and when to begin a war with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Bush has articulated a doctrine that divides the world into friends and enemies of the U.S., labeling countries such as North Korea, Iraq and even Iran as an 'axis of evil'.¹ It appears at this point that Bush personally favors war, and is backed by key members of the White House staff and the top civilian managers at the Department of Defense. But the State Department has counseled caution, warning that a war with Iraq could turn an entire generation of young Muslim men into angry enemies. Military leaders fear that an effort to remove Hussein would not be as easy as forcing him to vacate Kuwait, for Iraq would most likely not leave its troops in the open to face American air power, but would withdraw into Baghdad. Also, during the Persian Gulf War, Hussein was persuaded not to use chemical or biological weapons because of a threat of massive retaliation. Facing the prospect of a complete loss of power or worse, Hussein would be far more likely to unleash the weapons of mass destruction that he is suspected of possessing. Finally, the prospect of eliminating Hussein raises the question of who or what would replace him, as without dictatorial control, ethnic and religious tensions could break the nation into three warring parts, damaging regional stability and enhancing Iran's influence. The eventual decision over this war, and its outcome, could well define the Bush legacy.

Bush's success in the Afghanistan war was due in no small part to the consistency of his moral vision, which enabled him to ignore criticism and to focus on a single goal. His rhetoric in the summer of 2002 makes it clear that his moral vision remains strong, but his critics worry that his stark vision may prove a liability. They argue that Bush's inclusion of Iran as part of the 'axis of evil' was a setback to reformers in that country, and showed a lack of nuanced understanding of Mideast politics. Similar criticism emerged over Bush's policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in which he was seen as at worst hopelessly simplistic and at best far too uninvolved and aloof. As the crisis between Israel and the Palestinians grew worse, and became an obstacle to Bush's plans to move onto Iraq, the administration gradually re-engaged. Yet

as of this writing Bush has offered no vision of what a Mideast peace might look like. The administration seemed to change its position on a Palestinian state with some regularity, and the infighting within administration officials became more visible.

4 Bush as national leader

Before September 11th, George W. Bush sought to be a very different type of national leader than his predecessor. Clinton had dominated the news media, in times of triumph and scandal. His aides worried that he was overexposed, but the constant presence of Clinton on television seemed to be part of his success. Political scientist Samuel Kernell (1997) had argued that increasingly modern presidents would 'go public' in pursuit of power of the nation's agenda, and Clinton seemed to be the apotheosis of this tactic. By contrast, Bush set a far less frenetic media pace. He reduced the presence of the president in the nation's media life, and seemed to suffer no public relations penalty for that. Although it is highly unlikely that President Bush stays current on trends in political science, his actions meshed well with the insights of leading presidential scholar George Edwards, who has recently argued that national speeches and 'going public' have generally become far less effective (Edwards 2003).

The attacks of September 11, 2001 forced Bush to change gears and to speak to the nation on an almost daily basis. His early efforts at leading the nation in crisis were not successful. In his very first comments from Florida that morning, Bush appeared shaky and unable to reassure the nation. He referred to the perpetrators as the "folks who committed this act" and promised that after his remarks, he would return to Washington. But he did not return directly to Washington. On advice from the Secret Service and from Vice President Cheney, the president traveled first to a secure bunker in Nebraska before finally arriving in Washington late at night. When the president finally arrived at the White House that night, muted criticism of the president was already emerging. Many wondered whether the president, who had avoided military service in Vietnam, lacked the courage to be Commander in Chief of a nation under attack.

Bush did little to reassure the doubters with his first evening address to the nation. Similarly, when Bush arranged for news cameras to witness a phone call with Mayor Rudy Giuliani and Governor George Pataki of New York, his attempts to convey his sympathy and resolve did not seem at all presidential. For *Time* correspondent Margaret Carlson, Bush "looked like a teenager making weekend plans" (Mayer 2002: 13): hardly an uplifting description. During his visit to Ground Zero, the smoking wreckage that had once been

the World Trade Center, Bush seemed to find his voice in talking to the rescue workers. In his impromptu speech to them, and in his address at a national prayer service at the National Cathedral in Washington, he began to rise to the moment, to comfort a nation reeling from a sudden and unprecedented attack. By the time Bush spoke to Congress on September 20, the stakes were as high as they had been for any presidential address since 1941. Not only had the initial assaults undermined Americans' sense of security, but also the economy seemed to be in free fall. The New York Stock Exchange, located not far from the WTC, reopened days after the attack, but immediately lost \$1.4 trillion in share values and consumer confidence dropped. Bush would also have to address the question of domestic security, as many Americans feared further terrorist attacks, and wanted their government to take radical new steps to prevent them.

Congress was masterly and his subsequent statements, including a powerful speech at the United Nations, were measured and reassuring to the public. In one telling moment after the end of the speech to Congress, the president walked over to his chief congressional rival Democratic Senator Tom Daschle and embraced him. The rhetoric and the bipartisan symbolism fit the occasion perfectly. Americans felt that their president was in control of the situation and that the country would not only survive the crisis but even strengthen its common bonds of nationalism, civic duty and charity.

The surge in public support for Bush was dramatic. The last Gallup Poll prior to the terrorist attacks showed Bush with a presidential approval of only 51 per cent, but in the weeks following the tragedy his support soared to almost 90 per cent, with a scant 6 per cent disapproving of his handling of the presidency. Although it is not unusual for presidents to win widespread support in wartime – Bush's father reached nearly 90 per cent job approval by the end of the Gulf War – this surge was more than a public rally. Many of Bush's staunchest critics praised his performance, with some Democratic leaders even privately telling media sources that they were glad that Bush was president during the crisis. Bush's popularity had dissipated some by June 2002, but he remained quite popular. However, as the 2002 elections neared, normal politics began to return.

5 Bush the politician: learning from the sins of the father?

President George W. Bush has sought to learn from the political weaknesses and mistakes of the two previous administrations – those of his father and Bill Clinton. Bush's father once enjoyed unprecedented popularity ratings, but went on to receive a lower share of the vote (38 per cent) than almost any other incumbent president in U.S. history. The elder Bush neglected his

conservative base, and seemed to care little about public opinion – in the months after the Gulf War he did not commission a single public opinion poll, and he made little effort to polish his image before the American voter.

In contrast, Bill Clinton was a consummate politician who won reelection easily in 1996 and might well have won again in 2000 had he been eligible.² Clinton studied public opinion polls, and his ideological agility was remarkable. When the public saw him as too liberal he took symbolic stands on school uniforms and worked to hire more police on the beat; when his party saw him as too moderate he announced symbolic initiatives on racial reconciliation and bargained with congressional Republicans to restore funding for education and environmental programs. The measure of his skill was most evident in his presidency's darkest hour: Clinton's popularity peaked in February 1999 when he was only the second president in U.S. history to be tried after impeachment. But Clinton was widely derided by Republicans for lacking a moral center, and for doing only whatever was popular at the time.

Bush used the impression that Clinton had been too slavish towards polls in his campaign, promising "I will not be a president who uses my office as a mirror of public opinion... The most important job in Washington should be the president, not the president's pollster" (quoted in Scully 1999: A1). Yet once in office, Bush made extensive, if secretive, use of two pollsters. Great efforts were made to shield the influence of Bush's pollsters from public view, and costs were allocated in a way that made it difficult to compare Bush's outlays against previous presidents. Still, one estimate has Bush spending much more than his father did on polling, although significantly less than Clinton (Green 2002). Bush advisers insist that what polling takes place is only about packaging and spin, but this claim is difficult to sustain in light of the obvious political motivation in several key Bush moves.

The most economically conservative president elected in modern times had consistently advocated free trade throughout his brief public career, and yet endorsed steel quotas in 2002, a move that might help Republican candidates in key states in 2002. Similarly, Bush had promised to promote reduction in carbon dioxide emissions during the campaign, but quickly abandoned that promise in office. These reversals of Bush's deep convictions or campaign promises were widely seen as targeted political maneuvers designed to appeal to the electorates in several crucial states where Bush had won narrow victories or barely lost in 2000. The focus on reelection was clearest when it came to offshore drilling in Florida and California. In Florida, Bush's tightest 'victory', the administration moved to stop off shore drilling, but Bush ignored strong California objections to expand off shore drilling in that state that had rejected him decisively in 2000. The anti-poll politician showed that he (or his top political aides) knew how to read and follow statewide polls and election returns.

Bush continues to project an ambiguous ideological identity to the public, and like Clinton is able to shift to the left and right with the changing winds. In mid June 2002, for example, he proposed relaxing certain environmental standards but then quickly announced increases in funding for education and AIDS prevention in Africa. The AIDS policy was as subtly crafted as his compromise on fetal tissue research – the U.S. funds will go solely to prevent infected women from passing the virus to their babies, and not to provide sex education or condoms to prevent the spread of the disease. This allows Bush to claim credit for a compassionate policy without alienating potential support from conservative Catholics.

The most political of all the president's many roles is that of party leader (Rossiter 1960). Every president is automatically the leader of his party, although in America's weak party system this is far more symbolic than the leadership of a European party. As the nation's top Republican, Bush has been a highly effective fundraiser. In the summer of 2002 he held a series of high profile fundraising dinners raising unprecedented sums for the party's efforts in the 2002 mid-term elections.

In other areas, Bush met with much less success. In the aftermath of the pressure and bargaining that led to the passage of his tax cut, Bush decided to send a signal to Republican Senator Jim Jeffords of Vermont, who had voted with the Democrats, that future disloyalty would be punished. At a ceremony to honor a Vermont teacher, Bush conspicuously did not invite Jeffords, and shortly thereafter Jeffords bolted the Republican party and gave the Democrats a majority in the U.S. Senate. The inept attempt to discipline an independent moderate Republican in an evenly divided Senate was one of the worst political mistakes made by Bush, and one with immediate policy consequences.

The crucial test of Bush as a political leader will be the mid-term elections of November 2002. Historically, the party of the president loses seats in Congress in mid-term elections, a pattern broken only twice in this century (1934 and 1998). Bush cannot afford to lose more than a few in the House, and he needs to pick up at least one seat to regain the Senate for his Republican Party. Although in the first few months after the terrorist attacks Bush did not aggressively campaign for Republicans in the November 2001 elections, the restraints on partisan politicking quickly disappeared, and Bush has helped Republican challengers and incumbents with enthusiasm.³ Should the Republicans retain the House and regain the Senate, Bush's domestic agenda may be reinvigorated. However, the prospects of success in the mid-term elections were gravely damaged in the spring and summer of 2002 by two linked economic developments: a sudden drop in share values on Wall Street to five year lows, and a series of massive corporate scandals including some companies linked to Bush and Cheney.

As vast companies like Enron, Worldcom and Global Crossings went bankrupt, Bush came under heated political attack, both because of his personal and political links to Enron, and because of his past conduct in the oil business that seemed to mirror some of the corrupt practices currently under investigation. Although Bush pretended that the former head of Enron, Kenneth Lay, was not an intimate and had supported Bush's 1994 opponent, neither of these claims could withstand sustained analysis.⁴ Moreover, both Bush and Cheney had previously been in leadership positions in companies that set up overseas shell corporations to avoid American taxes, and allegations of Bush's insider trading resurfaced (Chait 2002). Democrats began to demand that Bush release all the records from the SEC investigation into his insider trading (Balz 2002). Although Bush's former economic ties have yet to hurt him politically, the stakes are quite high. A far less serious scandal involving far less money, Whitewater, hurt Clinton's presidency immensely, because it became a slowly suppurating wound that sapped prestige, power and focus.

The president, striving hard to portray himself as concerned about the freefall in share prices and in corporate integrity, convened an economic conference in the midst of his month-long vacation in August. However, because it included little diversity in views, it was widely derided as little more than boosterism (Krugman 2002). The political outlook for the president on the eve of the Congressional elections is far cloudier than it was at any point since the attacks of September. If the stock market tumble translates into another recession, or if Bush or Cheney is directly implicated in illegal or unethical corporate conduct, the political costs could be immense, far beyond losses in the mid-term election. Still, Bush remains popular with the American people, far more so than Clinton at a similar point in his presidency.

But by September there were many more public voices of opposition, including most current and former military generals.

6 Conclusion: from a mixed start to an uncertain future

Within the discipline of history, the study of counterfactuals has become quite popular: what if the Japanese had attacked Russia instead of the U.S. in 1941? What if the British had defeated the colonial army to retain control over what is now the U.S.? The presidency of George W. Bush will offer future historians a similar puzzle—what if there had been no terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001? As with much of American politics, the Bush presidency could forever be bifurcated into pre-September 11th and post-September 11th. A president without much knowledge or aptitude for foreign policy was forced to focus on international terrorism almost exclusively for months. A president who

had endured rocky early relations with key American allies immediately received the support and sympathy of much of the world in his war on terror. A president who had successfully strong-armed a highly partisan tax package through a narrowly divided Congress was suddenly immersed in the strongest mood of bipartisanship in decades. Although all three of these effects were temporary, as domestic politics reappeared, friction with allies reemerged, and partisanship never really receded much, American politics never returned to the pre-September 11th equilibrium, and probably never will.

Taken together, the Bush presidency presents a mixed record so far. By one measure, the first 18 months of the Bush presidency have been a triumph. No president has enjoyed such a long period of popularity as George W. Bush has since the attacks of September 11th. However, Bush himself warned during the campaign that poll numbers were not the appropriate measure of a president's success. Bush's early successes as an administrator have given way to infighting. His policy agenda enjoyed an early major victory on taxes but has since been stalled. Bush has won bipartisan support for his proposals in the war on terror, but doubts are now surfacing about administration plans to incarcerate indefinitely those they deem enemies. As the 'voice of the people' and national leader, Bush clearly benefited from the shift in focus produced by the terrorist attacks, but if the administration fails to deter future attacks the public response is unpredictable. As a politician, Bush has made the most of his skills as a fundraiser and his wartime popularity, but the loss of a Republican majority in the Senate was the direct result of Bush's mistake.

It is quite possible, however, that the first 18 months will not determine the ultimate success of Bush's presidency; rather, it is a question that will be answered at the intersection of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers where Saddam Hussein rules over Iraq. Of course, an invasion of Iraq is no certainty at this point, and Bush has authorized 'covert' operations to encourage a revolt against or the assassination of Hussein.⁵ Should war not come, the Bush presidency will be evaluated on the basis of his total record, including the state of the economy. Bush denies that he has plans for a war with Iraq on his desk, although Republican Senator John McCain (Arizona) quipped in response that these plans are merely on the desk in the next office down the hall from the Oval Office.

A war with Iraq does seem increasingly likely. For months, Bush has been contemplating a unilateral attack on Iraq. In the midst of his post-September 11th popularity, it is unlikely that either the American people or the Congress would prevent or complain about any such action – indeed Democratic leaders appeared to endorse such an action in June 2002. But by September there were many more public voices of opposition, including most current and former military generals. Many of America's allies would object, and such a move would likely be a violation of international law, but the go-it-alone

attitude of the Bush administration and U.S. military dominance might lead the White House to discount the importance of those factors. Should Bush win another easy victory, discover and eliminate weapons of mass destruction, avoid inflaming Arab opinion, and secure cheap oil for years to come, the political rewards would be immense. By contrast, if Bush leads America into an Iraqi quagmire, or if a successful invasion leads to the collapse of U.S.-backed regimes in Pakistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the Bush presidency will be judged by many as a failure at home and abroad.

Notes

1. The use of the term 'axis' clearly implies some level of cooperation, bringing to mind the World War II axis of Japan, Germany and Italy. However, it is doubtful that any significant cooperation is going on between Iran and Iraq, given the bitter hatred and suspicion still lingering between the two recent foes.
2. The Constitution was amended after the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt to limit all future presidents to two terms, or not more than ten years.
3. There were a limited number of key races in 2001, such as the governorships of New Jersey and Virginia, and the mayorships of a number of large cities.
4. Not only did Bush and Kenneth Lay have a long friendship, Enron was one of the two companies that provided a jet to the Bush campaign during the weeks of struggle over the Florida vote. Lay also did not, as Bush claimed, support his opponent in 1994. See Ratcliffe and Roth 2002. Unlike in the case of Clinton, these and other inconsistencies in Bush's public statements have not yet hurt his public image.
5. Direct US involvement in an assassination of Hussein would be a violation of law. However, if he were killed by his own people, this would not apply.

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