

# The Truth About Bush

A couple of weeks ago in this space I ran down the strengths and weaknesses of the Democratic presidential contenders, so now to be "fair and balanced" let's evaluate President Bush.

His strongest suit is the bond he forged with the American people immediately following the terror attack on September 11th. Mr. Bush reacted the way most Americans reacted: with anger and a stark determination to right the wrong.

And he did, he dethroned the Taliban and sent Al Qaeda into the caves. That sequence of events provided Bush with an emotional attachment to the folks. Only two other American Presidents in my lifetime have had that: John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan.

George W. Bush is also a strong leader. He doesn't waffle around, and he isn't poll driven. He makes determinations and sticks to them. Some believe this is a minus, but I think a strong leader is a major plus in this time of terror.

So, the President's determination to stay the course could very much help him win re-election if the course is deemed successful. That's the hard part.

Also, Mr. Bush is seen as an honest man who espouses traditional values. That will shore up his conservative base, and even though he's a huge spender, the right-wing will not abandon him.

Finally in the plus department, the President is helped by those who are demonizing him. The criticism is so over the top in many quarters that legitimate questions about Bush's leadership are sometimes lost among all the vitriol.

The loony left's defamatory attacks persuade no one; they are simply shrill notes to the choir that already despises the

President. Bush rarely responds to the grenades, wisely calculating that the excessive venom will turn off independent-thinking Americans.

And now for the downside. The President rarely shows his affable side, because he distrusts his ability to communicate. He cloisters himself behind iron gates when he should be holding town meetings and interacting with the people. When Mr. Bush speaks from the heart, he comes across well.

When he relies on canned speeches and statements, he looks like Don Knotts. He has good reason to distrust the press, but that doesn't mean he should avoid it. Mr. Bush's inaccessibility is a major drawback.

While the economy is picking up and will recede as a major campaign issue, the President has enormous problems in Iraq. He must acknowledge those difficulties and explain the mistakes his administration has made.

Mr. Bush continues to run a tightly controlled, closed shop. This will hurt him in a close election race. Americans will accept mistakes from a President, but they will not accept uncertainty. Bush's failure to get out in front of the administration's problems and define the payoff a stable Iraq will deliver is the biggest weapon the democrats have against him.

The President is generally disliked overseas and that's not good. He is portrayed in many places as an American chauvinist with a poor frame of reference. Thus, he is underestimated by prigs like Chirac and Schroeder.

The upside is that Mr. Bush is feared by the bad guys. Osama will not be visiting a Club Med anytime soon. But the President should make an attempt to be conciliatory to countries that might possibly help America down the road. He must swallow some pride, and if he doesn't, the country will suffer.

All in all, George W. Bush could go either way in the history books. If his Iraqi gamble pays off and worldwide terrorism is kept on the defensive, he will be well remembered. If Iraq degenerates into a fiasco, he'll side up alongside Lyndon Johnson.

Like him or not, the President is a man of strength and weakness. But the war on terror will define him, and that war is still to be determined.