

# Bush achieves goal in spite of criticism

By PAUL JEROME CROCE

President George W. Bush has received an unprecedented amount of criticism, even from military people, fiscal conservatives and other Republican-leaning constituencies. If the election had been held on the basis of these evaluations, it would not have been even close. Instead, Bush won by a comfortable margin. How'd that happen?



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In brief: This administration squandered support after 9/11 and inflamed a new generation of anti-Americanism, acted aggressively with pre-emption and diverted attention away from action against terrorism, and reversed its policies on nation-building but did not even plan the post-war nation-building well.

The Bush response was simple and remarkably effective. His campaign focused on Kerry's three-decade-old war record and devoted more energy to negative phrases and images about the senator's prospects for handling Iraq today than to defending Bush's own war record. When Bush talked about his own policies, his language was direct — to paraphrase and summarize, he said to the nation, "You are afraid, and I can protect you."

## CAMPAIGN SUBSTANCE

The simplicity of Bush's messages left a yawning gap about the substance of his policies.

Have Bush's policies been patriotic? Support for soldiers in the field brings out everyone's patriotism, at least in support of the troops themselves. Bush counted on that support to spill over into support for his policies. However, these policies have brought this democracy to act in the role of an empire.

Is Bush a moral, religious man? Most observers agree that he is an upright man with deep evangelical beliefs that guide his convictions. That will be enough for many voters. But he was remarkably quiet about his faith during the campaign. Perhaps that is because a majority of Americans do not share his application of the Christian tradition to a millennial vision of America's mission and at least the suggestion that our current policies are part of a new Western crusade. Without directly talking about his evangelical beliefs, Bush could assume his base of conservative "values" voters while appealing to religious moderates.

What about Iraq? The invasion of Iraq implemented a plan from Washington-based neo-conservative policy advocates dating back at least two decades. The policy calls for a dramatically idealistic transformation of Middle East nations toward democratic directions. Do a majority of Americans believe that this complex and sorrow-filled region can be transformed so quickly? The next four years may bring protracted warfare with no end in sight.

Do we need to stay the course? This is the realist view. Call this the power of incumbency in international affairs. Some voters may have thought that sentimental patriotism was just a lot of hype, never warmed to Bush's religious fervor and found his idealistic policies good for rearranging figures on a map but not for the rough and tumble of politics and war. And yet, these voters might have still supported Bush for the simple reason that we are already in Iraq.

## THE DOMESTIC FRONT

Bush's domestic policies did not bring the same avalanche of criticism, but clearly he governed from a sharply ideological perspective, based on an avid commitment to marketplace solutions to budget shortfalls, Social Security, education and even environmental protection. He is so committed to pro-business, anti-government approaches that he has even violated a cardinal principle of the right with the largest deficit in U.S. history.

He brings his evangelical faith to a host of cultural questions ranging from abortion and stem-cell research to gun legislation and prayer in school. As with Iraq policy, Bush's approaches certainly express valid points of view on the political spectrum, but ones that would only have claimed a decided minority if he had campaigned on them more explicitly.

The reason he did not speak more frankly about his views was that beneath the radar of most political attention, there was a slight shift to the left in the American electorate about a decade and a half ago. Americans responded with relief to the end of the Cold War because they were glad to be released from the burdens of brinkmanship. And even Democrats and liberal policy advocates have come to the view that government can give direction, even if it cannot by itself solve social problems. So in both foreign and domestic policymaking there

was a hidden and liberal-leaning consensus lurking beneath the angry polarization, Bush himself tacitly acknowledged this by running on the "compassionate conservative" slogan in 2000.

But that liberal shift was hijacked by three events over the past six years.

First, Clinton's scandal stopped the momentum of his moderately liberal administration, providing an almost cartoon version of the conservative and traditionalist suspicions about the youth of the 1960s generation — now grown but morally marred by their years of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

Second, the Republican candidate did not win a majority of votes in 2000. This is not a comment about the Electoral College and the Supreme Court, but a simple reminder that before this month, the last time the more conservative of our two major parties won a majority of popular votes for the presidency was 16 years ago — 1988.

And third, 9/11. Those terrible assaults would have helped any sitting president, but the fear they produced brought special allegiance to a president whose major asset was simple direct talk and action based on solid conviction.

The Bush campaign put less emphasis on reasons to vote for him than attempts to stimulate intuitions and feelings based on his toughness. The reasons to vote for Bush were certainly there, but they came from minority stances for evangelical politics, empire foreign policies and corporate solutions to social problems. Those core commitments did not get full expression, and so many Bush voters will get the four more years they voted for, but not necessarily the policies they actually want.

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