



# Bush Wins!

I know this might be one of those “Dewey Defeats Truman” moments... and I realize fully that there are great hazards in making predictions five months prior to Election Day. And, as of this writing, things don't look that great for George W. Bush.

Abu Ghraibgate—a prison torture scandal in which American troops engaged in conduct unbecoming while interrogating Iraqi POWs—is just starting to have a deleterious effect on the President's popularity. News of that scandal, however, has been tempered slightly by the release of a graphic video depicting the murder of American Nick Berg by rabid jihadists screaming “Allahu Akbar”—“God is Great.”

Nevertheless, a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll tells us that Bush's job approval rating has fallen to its lowest point yet. 51% of likely voters now disapprove of the President's handling of his job, the first time Bush has received a majority negative rating. Bad news at home and abroad may still have a cumulative effect that leads to the demise of the Bush White House.

But if there is anything the last year has shown, it is that events move rapidly, while Bush keeps pace. A parade of authors, whom the administration has labeled disgruntled former employees, has published one exposé after another, illustrating lapses in intelligence, homeland security, and war planning. The economy has not quite recovered from either a recession or the tragedy of 9/11. But Bush continues to give new meaning to the phrase “Teflon President.” Moreover, many people seem to connect with him on a *personal* level, appreciating the fact that he has convictions.

Unfortunately, for lovers of liberty, many of these convictions are theocratically based. The right-wing Bible belt, which voted overwhelmingly for Bush in the 2000 slugfest with Gore, has been trying to cash-in its chips. This President has yet to provide these constituents with any Supreme Court nominees, but he has proposed a Constitutional amendment defining marriage as a purely heterosexual union, and he has forged new restrictions on abortion, “obscenity” over the airwaves, and stem-cell research. His cabinet appointments of those who were perceived as “moderate” Republicans, both African Americans—Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice—did nothing to check the rise, within his administration, of hard-core neoconservative policymakers like Vice President Dick Cheney, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, senior

advisor Karl Rove, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. (As of this writing, the Defense Secretary is in a bit of trouble over Abu Ghraib. But in light of the reprehensible Berg snuff film, I suspect that few Americans will be asking for Rumsfeld's head in return.)

The Bush tax cuts have not been coupled with anything that might qualify as fiscal conservatism; the President has presided over an exploding federal budget deficit—the largest in U.S. history—and an expanding federal debt. In addition, Bush has signed into law the extension of Medicare prescription drug coverage for senior citizens, thus staking a claim to a traditional Democratic voting bloc. And the cost of the Iraq War alone will soon surpass the nearly \$200 billion inflation-adjusted U.S. share of the costs of World War I.

That Iraqi campaign—absent the discovery of any weapons of mass destruction or any formal ties between the Hussein regime and Al Qaeda—may have hurt some of Bush's credibility, but it has not shaken his resolve. This resolve was first punctuated with evangelical calls for a modern-day “crusade” against the “Evil Ones,” but it has since become a mission to make the world safe for “democracy” (or Halliburton and Bechtel, depending on your perspective). For a man who campaigned against the Clintonistas' belief in the nation-building enterprise, Bush has picked up the Wilsonian mantle proudly, while extolling the virtues of a PATRIOT Act, which has been used as a weapon against privacy and in the “war on drugs.”

The *good* news for Bush: Barring any massive attack on the U.S. home front, or an utterly devastating defeat in Iraq, on a par with, say, a Shi'ite and Sunni uprising that slaughters thousands of American troops, his approval rating will most likely remain stable. Even if the foreign policy arena should *collapse* for Bush, history shows that, in times of war, few Presidents are turned out of office, since the electorate rarely changes horses in mid-apocalypse.

The most recent example of a President hurt by the conduct of war is Lyndon Baines Johnson, who chose not to run for re-election in 1968. But the transition from LBJ to Richard Nixon should give critics of the new JFK (John Forbes Kerry) pause, for

even if Bush is defeated in November, it is highly unlikely that his successor would change anything *fundamentally* in the conduct of foreign affairs. A President Kerry would further institutionalize the Iraq War. He might be positively *Nixonian* in his approach: Before Nixon committed to the “Vietnamization” of the war in southeast Asia, to troop reductions and the elimination of conscription, his quest for “Peace with Honor” actually entailed a *widening* of the war. Likewise, Kerry himself might actually *increase* the number of troops in Iraq. He will do everything in his power not to go down as the President who “lost Iraq.” In an April 13, 2004 *Washington Post* essay, he declares:

Americans of all political persuasions are united in our determination to succeed. ... Our country is committed to help the Iraqis build a stable, peaceful and pluralistic society. No matter who is elected president in November, we will persevere in that mission. ... But to maximize our chances for success, and to minimize the risk of failure, we must make full use of the assets we have. If our military commanders request more troops, we should deploy them. ... We owe it to our soldiers and Marines to use absolutely every tool we can muster to help them succeed in their mission without exposing them to unnecessary risk. That is not a partisan proposal. It is a matter of national honor and trust.

Kerry has his share of “image” problems. He's a Vietnam hero, who turned against the war and threw away his medals, or his ribbons, or somebody else's medals, and who now twists himself into a pretzel every time he is asked a pointed question. His penchant for advocating two sides of every issue does not obscure the fact that he voted with his congressional colleagues to provide Bush with all the executive powers necessary to wage a war to which he himself is now committed. Indeed, Kerry is no “Peace Candidate.” And the American people are once again provided with very little *fundamental* difference between the major party candidates.

Other things being equal, voters are not going to choose Kerry, when they've already got in Bush a Republican dedicated to all the conventional Democratic planks: an expanding welfare state, budget deficits, and a war abroad. A long and potentially nasty campaign beckons; the race may center on 17 battleground states that are not yet claimed by either candidate and so much can happen between now and Election Day. But, as of this moment, I still think Bush wins.