

BUSH MAINTAINED HIS PRINCIPLES

Over time, Bush's legacy will improve

By David Holt

Printed in The Oklahoman December 19, 2008

Every president finds a few things come standard with the office: the nuclear codes, the swimming pool, and the millions of people who hate his guts. But the 2000 recount spawned an especially angry opposition that never lost its voice. In President George W. Bush's second term, that voice became a chorus.

And yet, as a former Bush White House aide (2002-2004) now back home, I foresee a better legacy than polls indicate. When history passes judgment, I believe facts ultimately prevail over the emotions of the time. Here are three I just can't shake:

› He kept us safe. This was the president's No. 1 priority after 9/11 and he delivered. He established policies at home and abroad that made it possible, and though criticism of his tactics muddied the waters of public opinion, history will recall the perfect score.

› He took on the big challenges. By fate, but mostly by design, this was a presidency of consequence. Americans would probably say they want a president that does what he must, regardless of whether the public understands the necessity. In practice, Americans are not so forgiving. This president pushed that tension past its breaking point. In attempting to solve looming challenges like Social Security and immigration, he was weakened in popular opinion. Imagine how we'll view those efforts when the knots grow even tighter. On the flip side, we won't spend much time in the future talking about Saddam Hussein, the lack of school accountability, and seniors needing prescription drugs, because he took those challenges on and addressed them. History likes presidents who don't casually pass on their problems.

› Iraq might be a success after all. It appears now that the invasion of Iraq may in fact lead to a democratic society capable of providing alternatives to terrorism. Making that possible was the president's decision to pursue an unpopular "surge," a singular act of political courage. American forces now have a chance to depart Iraq under circumstances resembling victory, rather than defeat. History will remember the conclusion of this saga.

These are the realities I believe will have a long and beneficial shelf life for this president. Right now, however, they're not necessarily areas where he enjoys public approval. History is funny like that.

(As for the ongoing economic crisis, it's simply too soon to assess its magnitude or the efficacy of the president's response.)

There were other perceptions about our president that soured the public's mood, and some self-inflicted missteps. Many critiques were legitimate. Many more were superficial, shortsighted or partisan. I believe the achievements above will outlast all but the fairest criticisms.

President Bush maintained his principles and did what had to be done, in the face of blistering opposition. Love him or hate him, his political courage was remarkable. He's not perfect, but we're not either, and sometimes he gave us more than we deserved. In the long run, we'll appreciate that personal strength, even if we're not in the mood today.