

November 23, 2005

Op-Ed Columnist

George Bush's Third Term

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President George W. Bush has just entered his third term. That's right. He's a three-term president. His first term was from 2001 to 2004, and it was dominated by 9/11, which Mr. Bush skillfully used to take a hard-right Republican agenda on taxes and war with Iraq, which was going nowhere on 9/10, and drive it into a 9/12 world.

His second term was very brief. It lasted from his re-election in November 2004 until Election Day 2005. This was an utterly wasted term. It was dominated by an attempt to privatize Social Security, which the country rejected, political scandals involving I. Lewis Libby Jr., Tom DeLay and Bill Frist, a ham-fisted response to Katrina and a mishandling of the Iraq war to such a degree that many Democrats and Republicans have begun to vote "no confidence" in the Bush-Cheney war performance. If ours were a parliamentary system, Mr. Bush would have had to resign by now.

So now begins Mr. Bush's third term. What will he do with it? The last time Mr. Bush hit rock bottom - then from too much drinking - he found God and turned his life around. Now that he has hit rock bottom again - this time from drinking in too much Karl Rove - the question is whether he can find America and turn his presidency around.

When I watch Mr. Bush these days, though, he looks to me like a man who wishes that we had a 28th amendment to the Constitution - called "Can I Go Now?" He looks like someone who would prefer to pack up and go back to his Texas ranch. It's not just that he doesn't seem to be having any fun. It's that he seems to be totally out of ideas relevant to the nation's future.

Since there is no such clause, Mr. Bush has two choices. One is to continue governing as though he's still running against John McCain in South Carolina. That means pushing a hard-right strategy based on dividing the country to get the 50.1 percent he needs to push through more tax cuts, while ignoring our real problems: the deficit, health care, energy, climate change and Iraq. More slash-and-burn politics like that will be a disaster.

Indeed, at a time when a decent outcome in Iraq is still possible and we are at the most important political moment in Baghdad - the first national election based on an Iraqi-written constitution - it was appalling to watch Mr. Bush and Dick Cheney using their bully pulpits to act like two Rove attack dogs, accusing Democrats of being less than patriotic on Iraq.

For two men who have fought this war without deploying enough troops, always putting politics before policy, without any plans for the morning after and never punishing any member of their team for rank incompetence to then accuse others of lacking seriousness on Iraq is disgusting. Yes, we need to stay the course for now in Iraq, but we can't stay the course alone or divided. That's the point.

We are about to produce the most legitimate government ever in the Arab world, and the Bush-Cheney team - instead of acknowledging its errors on W.M.D., seeking forgiveness and urging the country to unite behind the important effort to defeat the jihadist madness in Iraq - does what? It starts slinging mud at Democrats on Iraq. Sure, some Democrats goaded them with reckless remarks - but they are not in power. Where are the adults? We can't afford this nonsense, while also ignoring our energy crisis, the deficit, health care, climate change and Social Security.

"We are entering the era of hard choices for the United States - an era in which we can't always count on three Asian countries writing us checks to compensate for our failure to prepare for a hurricane or properly conduct a war," said David Rothkopf, author of "Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power."

"If President Bush doesn't rise to this challenge, our children and grandchildren will look at the burden he has placed on their shoulders and see this moment as the hinge between the American Century and the Chinese Century. George W. Bush may well be seen as the president who, by refusing to address these urgent questions when they needed to be addressed, invited America's decline."

Truly, I hope Mr. Bush rises to the challenge. We do not have three years to waste. To do that, though, Mr. Bush would need to become a very different third-term president, with a much more centrist agenda and style. If he does, he still has time to be a bridge to the future. If he doesn't, the resources he will have squandered and the size of the problems he will have ignored will put him in the running for one of our worst presidents ever.