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from the March 30, 2005 edition

Bush faces decline in approval ratings

From Social Security to Terri Schiavo to sinking polls, Bush fights for public faith amid the perils of a second term.

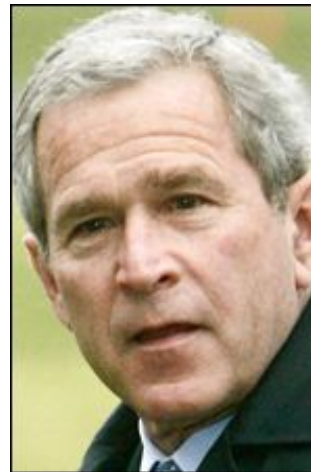
By Linda Feldmann | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

WASHINGTON - If President Bush wants to lay blame for his slumping public support on immediate events, he has plenty of targets.

There's his brief intervention into the Terri Schiavo case, which a majority of Americans fault. There's his inability thus far to make serious headway on Social Security reform, his top second-term priority. And there's the economy, starting with rising gas and fuel prices and worries over inflation.

Bush advisers, while playing down the latest numbers, tend to fault the recent economic uncertainty. Several major polls have shown Bush's job approval declining into the mid-40s, a drop of 5 to 7 points in just a week - in some cases, at or near an all-time low for his presidency. The latest Gallup Poll also shows the highest public pessimism over the economy in two years, with 33 percent saying it is getting better and 59 percent saying it is getting worse.

Ultimately, though, it may just be that successful second terms for American presidents are historically difficult to pull



BUSH: Some of his ratings are near an all-time low. LARRY DOWNING/REUTERS

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off, and Bush is now bumping into that perception head on. The politics of second terms are hard to avoid, even for a president whose party controls both houses of Congress. Bush is not running for reelection, but most of his Republican brethren on Capitol Hill are - and they know that the president's party often suffers its greatest defeats in the second-term midterm elections.

"Members of the president's own party get very nervous, because they know the history and they worry that they're tying their ship to an unsteady anchor," says Darrell West, a Brown University political scientist. "And of course, the opposition party is gunning for the next midterm elections, too, so they're generally not in a mood to cooperate."

**What's behind perceptions of Bush**

Bush has raised the stakes by laying out a self-consciously ambitious second-term agenda - not only to reconceptualize Social Security via voluntary partial privatization, but also to remake the tax system and spread democracy throughout the Middle East. It is on that last point - most centrally, Iraq - that Bush's second term will likely be judged. But even the progress in Iraq, starting with the holding of elections, hasn't provided the kind of polling dividends Bush might have expected.

In fact, it's possible that the perception of success and the spread of democracy in Iraq works against Bush in the way his father, the first President Bush, failed to turn his own success in the first Gulf War into victory come reelection time.

"Once he's no longer seen as a struggling wartime commander, the public focuses on more perhaps mundane matters, such as the price of gas," says Marshall Wittmann, a senior fellow at the Democratic Leadership Council.

Bush also doesn't seem to be getting much of a bump from the successes of his new secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, whose latest Gallup Poll numbers (taken March 18-20) show a 61 percent approval rating. It is also questionable whether the most popular person connected to the administration - first lady Laura Bush - could offer any reverse coattails for her husband. On Tuesday, Mrs. Bush left on a surprise visit to Afghanistan to focus on educational initiatives for Afghan women and also meet with President Hamid

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Karzai and have dinner with US forces at Bagram Air Base.

Bush himself took to the Rose Garden Tuesday to deliver remarks on freedom and democracy, with an audience of Iraqis and Iraqi-Americans. In general, Republican strategists say, Bush can help himself most by keeping his eye on the ball and sticking with his goals.

"You can't change your fundamental agenda, based on week-to-week variations in public opinion polls," says GOP pollster Whit Ayres. "A real leader doesn't do that. A real leader sets some ambitious goals ... and has faith that if they are valuable goals to pursue, public opinion will come along."

After all, he and other Republicans say, the second term is only two months old and there is plenty of time to make progress on Social Security reform. Mr. Ayres, who has polled on Social Security, says the president is correct in continuing to focus on educating the public about the problem. The greater the understanding of two key facts - that the president's plan would not affect benefits for seniors and that participation in personal accounts would be voluntary - the greater the support for Bush's proposal.

### On the other side

Among all the polling data, the silver lining for Bush and the GOP is that the Democratic leadership in Congress is just as unpopular as the Republican congressional leadership. The latest Pew Research Center poll, released March 24, shows Bush's approval rating at 45 percent, the Republican leadership at 39 percent, and the Democratic leadership at 37 percent.

In fact, rank-and-file Democrats are less happy with their party leadership (56 percent) than are rank-and-file Republicans (76 percent), according to Pew. So clearly, the Democrats cannot count on gaining from any Republican or presidential misfortune. This generalized dissatisfaction with politicians is not unusual, says Jim Guth, a political scientist at Furman University in Greenville, S.C.

"It isn't always a zero-sum game, where someone loses and someone else gains," says Professor Guth. "Sometimes everyone loses. There's not an assumption among the public that if the president is doing badly, the Democrats must be doing something right. It's that Washington is not doing well, and that includes the Democrats."

In the Pew poll, Americans give Congress low marks for working



**NOT SO FAST:** Leo McShea, a retired Colorado teacher, protests the president's proposed changes to Social Security in Denver.

DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP

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across party lines: Only 18 percent say that's going well. Only 23 percent say Congress is doing well at dealing with important issues, and only 23 percent say Congress is acting ethically. The percentage who support Bush's goal of introducing personal accounts into Social Security has declined. Now 44 percent approve of that idea, down from 46 percent last month and 54 percent in December.

On the administration's plan to allow oil- and gas-drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 42 percent are supportive and 46 percent oppose, Pew says.

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