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Bush Team Rethinks Its Plan for Recovery

New Approach Could Save Second Term

By *Peter Baker and Jim VandeHei*

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President Bush shifted his rhetoric on Iraq in recent weeks after an intense debate among advisers about how to pull out of his political free fall, with senior adviser Karl Rove urging a campaign-style attack on critics while younger aides pushed for more candor about setbacks in the war, according to Republican strategists.

The result was a hybrid of the two approaches as Bush lashed out at war opponents in Congress, then turned to a humbler assessment of events on the ground in Iraq that included admissions about how some of his expectations had been frustrated. The formula helped Bush regain his political footing as record-low poll numbers began to rebound. Now his team is rethinking its approach to his second term in hopes of salvaging it.

The Iraq push culminated the rockiest political year of this presidency, which included the demise of signature domestic priorities, the indictment of the vice president's top aide, the collapse of a Supreme Court nomination, a fumbled response to a natural disaster and a rising death toll in an increasingly unpopular war. It was not until Bush opened a fresh campaign to reassure the public on Iraq that he regained some traction.

The lessons drawn by a variety of Bush advisers inside and outside the White House as they map a road to recovery in 2006 include these: Overarching initiatives such as restructuring Social Security are unworkable in a time of war. The public wants a balanced appraisal of what is happening on the battlefield as well as pledges of victory. And Iraq trumps all.

"I don't think they realized that Iraq is the totality of their legacy until fairly recently," said former congressman Vin Weber (R-Minn.), an outside adviser to the White House. "There is not much of a market for other issues."

It took many months, and much political pain, for that realization to sink in. In the heady days after reelection, Bush and Rove sketched out an ambitious agenda to avoid the traditional pitfalls of second-term presidents. They settled on four domestic priorities for 2005: remaking Social Security, revising the tax code, cracking down on court-clogging litigation and easing immigration rules. As the year ends, only some litigation limits have passed, and Social Security, tax and immigration plans are dead or comatose.

As Bush focused on Social Security the first half of the year, the cascading suicide bombings in Iraq played out on American television screens. It was summer by the time Bush decided to shift public attention to Iraq. A speech at Fort Bragg, N.C., failed to move the political needle. Bush then escaped to Texas for August -- a vacation shadowed for weeks by a dead soldier's mother named Cindy Sheehan, then brought to an abrupt halt by Hurricane Katrina.

Plans to rebuild public confidence on Iraq were shelved as the president was consumed by the hurricane and the fiasco over Harriet Miers's Supreme Court nomination. Then after I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Vice President Cheney's chief of staff, was charged with perjury in the CIA leak case, Democrats forced an extraordinary closed-door Senate session to demand further investigation of the roots of the Iraq war.

That proved a galvanizing moment at the White House, according to a wide range of GOP strategists in and out of the administration. Rove, Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman and White House strategic planning director Peter H. Wehner urged the president to dust off the 2004 election strategy and fight back, according to officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to share internal deliberations. White House counselor Dan Bartlett and communications

[enlarge photo](#)



President Bush greeted troops at Fort Bragg, N.C., last summer after speaking about the Iraq war. Recently, humbler assessments about Iraq have helped him regain political footing. (By Charles Dharapak -- Associated Press)

Photos



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director Nicolle Wallace, however, counseled a more textured approach. The same-old Bush was not enough, they said; he needed to be more detailed about his strategy in Iraq and, most of all, more open in admitting mistakes -- something that does not come easily to Bush.

Although Rove raised concerns about giving critics too much ground, the younger-generation aides prevailed. Bush agreed to try the approach so long as he did not come off sounding too negative. Peter D. Feaver, a Duke University specialist on wartime public opinion who now works at the White House, helped draft a 35-page public plan for victory in Iraq, a paper principally designed to prove that Bush had one.

Bush went into campaign mode, accusing Democrats of hypocrisy for voting to authorize the war and then turning against it. When Rep. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.) proposed pulling troops out of Iraq, the White House issued an unusually harsh and personal response comparing him to liberal filmmaker Michael Moore. The original draft, officials said, had been even tougher.

Within a few days, though, the president shifted tone. Writing off 30 percent or more of the public as adamantly against the war, his advisers focused on winning back a similar-size group that had soured on Iraq but, they believed, wanted to be convinced victory was possible.



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- a planetarium**
- a swimming pool**
- the White House kitchen**
- a wine cellar**

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