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PARTICIPATE

The threat to Bush

The fear the president invoked to marshal support for the Iraq war is failing him in his war on the New Deal.

By Sidney Blumenthal

Feb. 10, 2005 | Fear made George W. Bush's presidency, gave him his "mission" and allowed him to remain in office. Before Sept. 11, 2001, he had drifted to the lowest approval rating ever for a president after just eight months on the job. Throughout the 2004 campaign, Republicans hammered "Sept. 11," "terrorism" and "Saddam Hussein" like an anvil chorus. Bush's victory, carried by the theme of terrorism, was the smallest win of any [second-term president](#) since Woodrow Wilson in 1916, but he acts as if it is the moment of deliverance Republicans have awaited for three generations -- the chance to undo the unnatural world that has been built up since Herbert Hoover lost the White House. Bush's transference of fear from the war on terrorism to the war on the New Deal may not be confusing to him because he remains its conductor. Fear fostered his "political capital." Why should it fail him in his attempt to instill social insecurity against Social Security?

But only fear generated in foreign policy has protected him politically from his unpopular positions on domestic issues. Since Sept. 11, without variation, Bush's poll numbers have directly paralleled the quantity of news stories about terrorism, according to a study conducted by retired Air Force Col. Sam Gardiner, who has taught strategic communications at the National War College. The more terrorism dominates the media, the higher Bush's ratings; conversely, whenever terrorism declines in the news, Bush begins to sink. The war on terrorism is his meta-narrative. "The president's approval is tied to our story on terrorism," Gardiner told me. (This linear correlation cannot be a mystery to Karl Rove.) But what happens when the meta-narrative fades and the ground shifts?

In the Middle East, the Israelis and Palestinians have declared a cease-fire. The progress of negotiations will depend in large part on an increased [U.S. role](#) as the chief broker. Can Bush continue to act as the innocent bystander? In Iraq, since the election there, even military operations against the Sunni insurgency have moved into the context of internal politics. Does Kurdish ambition have any bounds? Will the Kurds be permitted to control oil-rich [Kirkuk](#) or the presidency, either of which would threaten NATO's relationship with Turkey? Is the U.S. military to be the enforcer of Islamic law imposed by the Shiites, including polygamy and mandatory chadors? More broadly, is the U.S. the internal security force for [Iran's interest](#) in Shiite ascendancy? (The Iranian ambassador to the U.K., Syed Mohammad Hossein Adeli, in a speech last week in London, said: "Thanks to American adventurism, we have gotten rid of both the Taliban and Saddam.") And, having now encouraged European engagement with Iran on nuclear development, is the U.S. willing to join in to bring it to a successful conclusion?

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Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, [in Paris](#), boldly declared: "It is time to turn away from the disagreements of the past." But whose past did she mean? Her next statement gave the answer going to the heart of the matter: "The key to our future success lies in getting beyond a partner based on common threats, and building an even stronger partnership based on common opportunities, even those beyond the transatlantic community." Rice's pronouncement is nothing less than a break with Bush's threat-based approach to this point. Clearly and sharply, without ambiguity or nuance, she said that U.S. foreign policy must now be rooted not in the war on terrorism, or even shared values and history, but in "opportunities."

A senior European diplomat told me that Rice's tone, departing from the neoconservative orthodoxy, is a positive but tentative first step. "But what is the content?" he asked, echoing sentiment across Europe. If Rice fails to provide the substance to fill in the doctrine of the new opportunism, the glimmer of goodwill she may have gained from her European trip will instantly disappear and her credibility will be shattered.

While Rice was on her grand tour, President Bush rushed from his State of the Union address to rallies in Western and Southern states to stump for Social Security privatization. Despite all authoritative research by the Social Security actuary and the Congressional Budget Office to the contrary, Bush insists the system is collapsing. As he jetted across the country Republican representatives and senators either announced their opposition or reserved judgment.

At his rallies, the crowds cheered his words against terrorism as though they were a nostalgic reenactment of his campaign and then fell into befuddled silence. His convoluted explanations on Social Security were so confusing that Bush confessed, "Does that make any sense to you? It's kind of muddled. Look, there's a series of things that cause the -- like, for example, benefits are calculated based upon the increase of wages, as opposed to the increase of prices. Some have suggested that we calculate -- the benefits will rise based upon inflation, as opposed to wage increases. There is a reform that would help solve the red if that were put into effect. In other words, how fast benefits grow, how fast the promised benefits grow, if those -- if that growth is affected, it will help on the red. OK, better? I'll keep working on it."

A week after his State of the Union address focusing on Social Security, the White House has admitted it has no timetable for proposing a plan. The urgent centerpiece of Bush's second term is indefinitely on hold.

Bush's gibberish on Social Security is not the symptom of a man without qualities. Bush can be articulate, a master of his talking points and highly focused. His inability so far to sell his latest case of fear, however, may presage growing political incoherence.

The momentum of events abroad and at home has carried him to an unknown place where complication may ambush him at every turn. The consequences of George W. Bush are the

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Sidney Blumenthal, a former assistant and senior advisor to President Clinton and the author of "[The Clinton Wars](#)," is writing a column for Salon and the Guardian of London.

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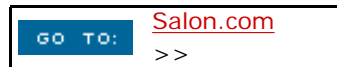
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