

[Sign in](#) | [Register](#)**Go to:****GuardianUnlimited Special reports**

Home	UK	Business	Online	World dispatch	The wrap	Weblog	Talk	Search
The Guardian	World	News guide	Arts	Special reports	Columnists	Audio	Help	Quiz



**Special
report
Iraq**

Washington dispatch

Bush prepared for another test of strength

Democrats will struggle to mount a challenge to an incumbent enjoying the glow of victory, writes Julian Borger

Search this site

Wednesday May 7, 2003

Full coverage

[Special report: Iraq](#)[Iraq archived articles](#)[Interactive guides on Iraq](#)

More special reports

[Britain's armed forces](#)[The anti-war movement](#)[Al-Qaida](#)[United States](#)[Iran](#)[Israel & the Middle East](#)[Nato](#)

In order for President Bush to perform his stunt of landing on the USS Abraham Lincoln last week, the aircraft carrier, which had been only a few miles from home, had to turn around and head back out into the Pacific.

The sailors on board had not seen their loved ones for a record 10 months, and they had to wait another 24 hours so the commander-in-chief could have his photo-opportunity in a pilot's outfit, hanging out and talking tough with the other jocks on deck like a Top Gun. Such are the advantages of incumbency.

Meanwhile, the nine Democratic contenders for the 2004 presidency had to share a single college stage in South Carolina, swapping soundbites in a debate that not even local television carried live, even though it represented the first such direct exchange of ideas of the presidential campaign.

Deepening the Democratic conundrum was the fact that the television journalists covering the president's victory lap on board the Lincoln mentioned the human and financial cost of that particular piece of political theatre.

Similarly, the networks marvelled to hear that the president had actually taken the controls of his navy Viking jet above the Pacific, but did not mention that his familiarity with airplanes was the product of creative draft-dodging. George Bush learned to fly at the Texas Air

[Turkey](#)

[Full index of our special reports](#)

In this section

[Opinion is split over proposed leader of Iraq](#)

['Voice of Saddam' urges uprising](#)

[Garner promises to weed out Ba'athists](#)

[Cheney company 'running Iraqi oil industry'](#)

[Archbishop balks at war thanksgiving](#)

[US says it has found mobile bio-arms lab](#)

[Return of the Baghdad blogger](#)

[Faith and freedom: Faith and freedom](#)

[Iraq's most wanted: those captured](#)

[Chalabi threatens to lift lid on Saddam links](#)

[Iraqi weapons scientists too fearful to surrender, UN man claims](#)

[Poland puts Iraq carve-up in doubt](#)

[Who is ready to do what](#)

[Marine patrols take wary step into the dark](#)

[Oil scandal billionaire tells French court of bribes](#)

National Guard, where connections helped him secure a sought-after pilot's slot that saved him from being sent to Vietnam.

Mainstream television news channels have learned that the mere suspicion of cynicism will leave them vulnerable to a vilification campaign, of the sort that was inflicted on the country music band the Dixie Chicks for apologising on behalf of Texas for giving Bush to the world. Pop musicians used to say such anti-establishment things all the time, but no longer without paying a price in publicly smashed CDs.

Meanwhile, Fox News, a network as slavishly pro-government as any state-run channel in the old Soviet bloc, has taken a healthy lead in the ratings. Patriotism pays, and this is no time to question the wisdom of the war. The nine Democratic candidates seemed painfully aware of that fact at their inaugural weekend debate. Senator Joe Lieberman, the most hawkish of the nine, made a point of questioning the fighting spirit of his rivals, particularly the former Vermont governor, Howard Dean, who had opposed the war, and Senator John Kerry, who had been ambivalent, opposing the war in principle but siding with the president in the crucial Congressional vote last year.

"No Democrat will be elected president in 2004 who is not strong on defence, and this war was a test of that strength," Senator Lieberman said. The more complacent Democrats are predicting that 2004 will be replay of 1992, when the first President Bush lost the vote on the economy after winning the war in the Gulf. The parallels are striking, and the economy is still very much in a mess, with unemployment climbing last week to 6%. But there are two very good reasons why this election is not going to be a replay of the first Clinton victory: the "war on terror" is quite unlike the last Gulf war; and this Bush is nothing like the last Bush. The 1991 Gulf war had a clear beginning and an end. After it was over, it receded quickly in the popular imagination. That will not happen with the open-ended struggle with terrorist groups and the "axis of evil".

On the Abraham Lincoln, Bush managed the trick of claiming victory without declaring the war over. The battle would go on in Iraq, with the search for Saddam Hussein and his weapons, and across the globe, in pursuit of al-Qaida. That means there will be a constant supply of patriotic military backdrops for presidential speeches. Next year's Republican party convention, at which Bush will be formally nominated as the party's presidential candidate, has been pushed back in the electoral calendar, with the result that it will immediately precede commemorations to mark the third anniversary of the September 11 attacks.

Moreover, the man once derisively known as "Shrub" has grown into a far more adept political operator than the Bush he was grafted from.



While his father gave the impression he did not think the economy was his responsibility, the current president began a series of speeches on the economy before the Iraq war was over, and he used a series of martial settings, like tank and armoured car factories, to frame the debate. It was, he said, the Senate that was holding back recovery by seeking to pass what he called a "little bitty" \$35bn (£22bn) tax cut in place of his own, which is twice that big.

Worse still for the Democrats, they have no one like Clinton - a natural politician of the calibre that only surfaces once a generation or so. Certainly, none of the nine contenders on show in South Carolina showed anything close to the same talent.

Nevertheless, if the party selects a candidate who is at least competent, it has reasons to hope for a windfall. The country is still as deeply divided over domestic politics as it was in 2000, and there is little in the Bush economic plan that is likely, on its own, to produce a recovery. Local governments are starved of funds and beginning to cut jobs and public services.

The ceaseless struggle against America's enemies will not necessarily protect Bush from responsibility for a weak economy, and only a minority of Americans believe his tax cuts are the right remedy. Furthermore, it is far from clear whether the war on Iraq, particularly in the absence of a Palestinian-Israeli peace deal, has made the US any safer. The Democrats can make a plausible argument that domestic security has been neglected in favour of foreign adventures. In a year's time, a few more Americans may agree.

Email

julian.borger@guardian.co.uk

Special reports

[United States of America](#)

[Iraq](#)

Archive

[More articles by Julian Borger](#)

World news guide

[North America](#)

Useful links

[The Washington Post](#)

[Arlington national cemetery](#)

[Washington monument](#)

[The Pentagon](#)

[Capitol Steps political satire](#)

[Washington crossword](#)

[Washington DC homepage](#)

[Printable version](#) | [Send it to a friend](#) | [Read it later](#) | [See saved stories](#)



Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2003