

Search:

[NYTimes.com](#) > [Opinion](#)

Presidential Character

George Bush's long-term plans for 2003 probably did not call for his August vacation to be followed by a national television address trying to justify a floundering policy in Iraq. Just about nothing, in fact, looks like what he must have hoped for in the run-up to an election. To many Americans, the economic recovery is anything but — 2.7 million private-sector jobs have been lost in the last three years. The number of people living below the poverty line is rising, the trade imbalance has reached unnerving proportions, and the federal budget deficits have grown so huge that even the International Monetary Fund has begun expressing concern. Most of the Bush domestic agenda is a sad deflated version of its earlier incarnation.

It is useful at times like this to look back on the road that brought a president into trouble and try to divide bad luck from bad guesses, and both from the wrong turns that stem from the innate nature of the presidency itself. In the case of Iraq, there is a little of each. Early in his term, Mr. Bush was stuck with trouble that was not of his making, including both the terrorist attack and the sinking economy. His judgment about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq appears to have been wrong — and, worse, hyped. But over all, it was a bad guess that was shared by intelligence experts from the Clinton administration and many allies.

Other wrong turns, however, were chosen because of a fundamental flaw in the character of this White House. Despite his tough talk, Mr. Bush seems incapable of choosing a genuinely tough path, of risking his political popularity with the same aggression that he risks the country's economic stability and international credibility. For all the trauma the United States has gone through during his administration, Mr. Bush has never asked the American people to respond to new challenges by making genuine sacrifices.

He committed the military to war, but he told civilians they deserved big tax cuts. He seems determined to remake the Middle East without doing anything serious about reducing our dependence on Middle East oil. His energy policy is a grab bag of giveaways to domestic oil and gas lobbyists. He refuses to ask for even the smallest compromise when it comes to fuel-efficient cars.

The pattern goes further. Mr. Bush rolled out a domestic agenda that included some ambitious programs aimed at lifting up America's least fortunate, particularly his No Child Left Behind education package. But in this — as in the African AIDS initiative and even his controversial faith-based initiative for social services — Mr. Bush has been content to take the credit for proposing, without paying the political dues necessary to get things done. Certainly most American parents, whose public schools are racked by state and local budget crises, are not feeling that their children are enjoying better educational opportunity. The AIDS program that got such a positive response when the president unveiled it has been underfinanced by Congress, with the White House's encouragement.

Even the administration's foreign policy reflects its tendency to go for quick gratification without much thought of the gritty long haul. The invasion of Iraq appears to have been planned by people who assumed that after a swift military assault, Saddam Hussein would be gone and Iraq would quickly snap into a prosperous, semidemocratic state that would be a model for the rest of the Middle East.

When it turned out that things were far more complicated, the president hedged on the price tag — apparently out of fear that if Congress knew how high the bill was going to be, there would not be enough votes for another round of tax cuts. Congress, however, was happy enough to be deluded until it was too late. Now we know the cost is going to be massive, with much of the tab

ARTICLE TOOLS

-  [E-Mail This Article](#)
-  [Printer-Friendly Format](#)
-  [Most E-Mailed Articles](#)

READERS' OPINIONS

- [Forum: Join a Discussion on Today's Editorials](#)

TIMES NEWS TRACKER

| Topics | Alerts |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Bush, George W | |
| Politics and Government | |
| International Relations | |
| Taxation | |
| Create Your Own | Manage |
| Most Popular Alerts | Take a Tour |
| CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE  | |

to be paid by the future generations who will be saddled with the Bush debt.

The United States has no clear exit strategy from Iraq or immediate hope of a turnaround in a violent, complicated and expensive commitment. The hard realities of postwar Iraq have convinced Mr. Bush that he needs the United Nations support he snubbed before the invasion. But even there he is avoiding the hard choice of acknowledging his error and ceding real authority to other nations. Diplomats are wondering, with good reason, whether Mr. Bush is embarking on a new era of international cooperation or simply giving them permission to clean up his mess.

Mr. Bush is a man who was reared in privilege, who succeeded in both business and politics because of his family connections. The question during the presidential campaign was whether he was anything more than just a very lucky guy. There were times in the past three years when he has been much more than that, and he may no longer be a man who expects to find an easy way out of difficulties. But now, at the moment when we need strong leadership most, he is still a politician who is incapable of asking the people to make hard choices. And we are paying the price.

RELATED ARTICLES

- [White House Presses Congress on Medicare Drug Benefit](#) (September 2, 2003)
- [AFTER THE WAR: DIPLOMACY; U.S. NOW SIGNALS IT MIGHT CONSIDER U.N. FORCE IN IRAQ](#) (August 28, 2003) \$
- [Venezuelan Opposition Files to Seek Referendum on Chávez](#) (August 21, 2003) \$
- [AFTER THE WAR: DIPLOMACY; U.S. WILL ASK U.N. FOR MOVE TO WIDEN THE FORCE IN IRAQ](#) (August 21, 2003) \$
- [AFTER THE WAR: THE PRESIDENT; Bush Condemns Iraq Bombing And Vows U.S. Will Persevere](#) (August 20, 2003) \$

Find more results for [Bush, George W](#) and [Politics and Government](#) .

TOP OPINION ARTICLES

- [Showdown in Cancún](#)
- [Paying the Bills for Iraq](#)
- [Straight Talk on Judicial Nominees](#)
- [Whose Fault? The Blame Game \(6 Letters\)](#)
- [Black, White and in Pain \(2 Letters\)](#)