

Reverse the Curse

Bringing it back to the center

BY SHEEVA AZMA

In 2000, the president of the United States was chosen by a 5-4 Supreme Court decision. Since then, things have only gotten worse. Over one thousand military men and women have died, the wounded economy has outsourced millions of American jobs, our domestic issues have been marginalized, and we have witnessed apolitical subjects like science be impacted by the radical dogma of the current administration. Now, it's time for us to judge these events by choosing a president for the next four years. Will it be the Republican incumbent, George W. Bush, or the Democratic challenger, Senator John Kerry? None of us, not even the pollsters, know who will be elected. But a brief analysis of the past four years is enough to show who should be elected.

George W. Bush inherited a \$2 billion budget surplus at the time of his inauguration; at the close of his term, he will have accrued a budget deficit of \$445 billion, according to the nation's Office of Management and Budget (OMB). To compensate for this deficit—the highest in the history of the United States—the current administration will institute inflation-adjusted budget reductions if Bush is elected to a second term. At a time when schools are struggling to meet the unfunded mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Bush administration would reduce education funding by over \$1.4 billion. College financial aid programs like Pell Grants would lose \$327 million, further burdening lower-income students who are already dropping out of college due to rapidly increasing tuition costs. Other programs would be hit, too: among them, veterans' medical care would be

cut by \$1.5 billion and social programs would be cut by approximately \$21 billion.

The OMB report notes that tax cuts account for 29 percent of the deterioration in the budget balance in the past three years. The monstrous deficit is evidence that Bush's tax cuts, most of which went to the top five percent of America's wealthy, are not in the best interests of the general populace. In a second term, the Bush administration would further cut back on important government programs at the expense of the American people. Democrats in the House Budget Committee echo this sentiment: "The Administration is requiring these [budget] cuts because it chose to promote oversized tax cuts, and now cannot afford to fund vital government services."

After incurring an infamous national debt, the Bush administration also ends the past four years as an adversary of the American worker. Recently instituted federal rules have removed overtime protections for at least six million US employees. Furthermore, we have lost 2.2 million private-sector jobs since 2001.

In addition, Bush has sent environmental policy into retrograde. He withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement to slow down global warming. He has also opened federal lands like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil exploration and drilling. Despite the environmental disaster, he has resisted locating cheaper petroleum sources or funding research for alternative energy sources. A July 19 article in the Associated Press cites former EPA chief Russell E. Train, who served under two Republican presidents

from 1973-1977, decrying Bush's environmental policies and promising a vote for Kerry in the 2004 election.

Under the current administration, even science research has become political. Stem cell research, which Bush stubbornly opposes, has been a particularly salient issue in this year's election. Early in his presidency, citing his conservative pro-life stance, Bush chose to restrict federal funding of stem cell research to fewer than 60 pre-existing cell lines. This February, President Bush replaced two members of the Bioethics Panel, which advises him on issues such as cloning and stem cell research, with more ideologically similar members. In the latest development this past summer, the Bush administration ordered government scientists to clear their work with a senior political appointee before collaborating with the World Health Organization.

In 2001, after the worst day in recent United States history, we came together in our grief and anguish only to be exploited by the Bush administration's "War on Terror." Among the ulterior motives in this disorganized effort remains the desire to give the United States a stake in the petroleum resources of the Middle East. Though championed by the President, the war was the brainchild of Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld of the Department of Defense, and Vice President Dick Cheney, former CEO of Halliburton. *The New York Times* reported on May 24, 2004 that this major oil company is helping to rebuild Iraq's oil business; its construction arm, Kellogg Brown & Root, provides services for the military as well.

The Bush administration now tries to write off its failures in this war, but after thousands of casualties, it's far too late. "Group-think" is just one of the series of psychological excuses Bush's party has used to escape his personal culpability. In 1977, American psychologist Irving Janis coined the phrase to describe decision-making in groups, where agreement is more important than

realistic alternatives to a given situation. This type of “thinking” is disastrous in government decision-making because it is driven by the fear of dissent. According to Janis, those involved in group-think feel intense pressure to conform to the others in their group, leading to self-censorship, self-denial, and criticism of dissenting voices. We have seen how this frame of mind inevitably leads to dangerous domestic and foreign policies. At the recent Republican National Convention, we even heard it verbalized as Rudy Giuliani told the nation, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” We must leave this hazardous mindset and cultivate an environment that once again values free speech and democracy above uniformity of opinion.

In addition to sacrificing the honor of the country, President Bush has also crippled the economy and diminished the general well-being of the United States. Most would agree that we are economically worse off than we were four years ago. Nonetheless, it seems Bush has intimidated Americans into thinking he is the only candidate who can reverse his own failures.

Either candidate must do one thing if elected to office: fix the country. The winning candidate must succeed in Iraq, fight terrorism, rescue Medicare and the American economy, and perform any other necessary executive repair. Not surprisingly, both candidates say that they can. Even so, the burden is mostly Kerry's. Bush needs only to persuade Americans that he can reverse his past mistakes. In contrast, Kerry must convince the public not only that he is more trustworthy than the incumbent with the well-being of the nation, but that he can restore order to the rattled nation Bush will be leaving him. Kerry must not have an abstract platform; instead, he must present a concrete plan for the next four years. Indeed, Kerry has such a plan, and he's made it publicly available in a 263-page book, aptly titled *A Plan for America*, on his website.

Because the country's necessities for the next four years are clear, this election will come down to the candidates' personalities and political ideologies. Third-party supporters may justify their votes by arguing that Bush and Kerry are similar as candidates. These people are correct, but only on two counts. Both Bush and Kerry went to Yale, and both want to be president. Beyond these similarities, the personal and political differences between the two candidates are striking. As a presidential candidate and intellectual figure, Kerry has so much more to offer than Bush does. The poise and detachment for which Kerry has previously been criticized will prove to be an important asset in this presidential election. As we pull in to the final days of Election 2004, the intense pressure will highlight Kerry's strengths as a seasoned political figure and public speaker. Bush, by contrast, tries to argue his way out of participating in presidential debates and is notorious for his verbal blunders.

Instead of using eloquence, the Bush camp has resorted to manipulating the country with dogma and fear—including soliciting Republican support through church membership directories. They are also pulling out all the rhetorical stops, even to the point of using patronizing scare tactics. On September 9 of this year, Vice President Dick Cheney said, “It's absolutely essential that eight weeks from today, on November 2, we make the right choice, because if we make the wrong choice then the danger is that we'll get hit again and we'll be hit in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States.”

Ideologically, Bush and Kerry are from different universes. Bush believes in a country with problems which can be simplified and solved with unchecked force. His supporters euphemize this as “resolve.” Kerry, on the other hand, understands the nuances of the country's problems and realizes that a “one-size-fits-all” approach is not appropriate for

foreign and domestic policy. He has weathered attacks of being a “flip-flopper” for his willingness to explore alternative solutions at a time when dissent is still denounced as un-American by many Republicans. Despite the specifics of what may or may not have happened on a Swift Boat in 1969, Kerry's war experience demonstrates his courage and resolve. Kerry's background, combined with his patience and persistence, will be able to end the violence in Iraq and create a more organized, targeted approach to combating terrorism. Additionally, Kerry's nineteen years of making difficult Senate decisions have provided him with greater insight into the American political process than Bush's four years of suppressing our civil liberties (“free speech zones,” anyone?).

With Bush in office the past four years, a “flip-flop” may be just what we need. The current administration is so fiscally and socially radical that it will take at least four years to get near the center, and perhaps an entire decade to balance the budget once again. Because Kerry would be obligated to bring the United States back to a stable center, the argument that he will bring the excesses of liberalism to the executive branch is absolutely invalid. The frightening notion that our government could possibly become more radically conservative and even less representative of the American people should motivate political parties of all ideologies to reconcile minor political differences for the sake of social, political, and economic recovery.

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