

Bush a One-term President?

by Bruce E. Johansen

In Omaha, Nebraska, USA

September 2003

Historians who try to predict the future may be courting trouble. With that thought in mind, I would like to venture a suggestion: A year from now, George W. Bush may be on his way to retirement as a one-term U.S. president.

For this outcome to become something more than a wishful thinking by Bush's growing opposition in the United States, however, the Democratic Party must nominate and unite behind a popular candidate who can take advantage of Bush's many weaknesses. Bush has become steadily more vulnerable during the past year, or roughly since he became obsessed with making war in Iraq. Senator Chuck Hagel, a Republican from Nebraska, where 60 per cent voted for Bush in 2000, was quoted in the *Omaha World-Herald* as saying: "There are some very dangerous signs out there for him."

Bush's biggest weakness at present is the more than three million people in the United States who have lost their jobs since he became president in 2000. While some of these job losses have been caused by the economic cycle, others may be attributed to government policies that direct wealth upward in the class structure. Bush's tax cuts have been radically biased toward the rich. While Bush's approval ratings soared as high as 86 per cent after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon two years ago, they declined steadily in the United States during 2003. By the fall, his approval was ranging between 45 and 55 per cent. In one poll, 41 per cent of the respondents said they would "definitely" vote against him. In the same poll, 29 per cent said they would "definitely" vote for him, with the remainder (almost a third of the electorate) undecided. The passionate nature of opposition to Bush in the United States should not be underestimated.

Presidential politics in the United States has been marked by swift reversals of fortune. In 1972, for example, Richard Nixon out-pollled George McGovern in 9 of 50 states. Less than two years later, he left office in the midst of the Watergate scandal, facing near-certain impeachment. George W. Bush's father experienced some of the highest approval ratings in the history of the presidency in 1991, following the conclusion of the brief Gulf War. At the time, Bill Clinton was known nationally only as governor of Arkansas. One year later, riding the incisive if inelegant phrase "It's the economy, stupid!" Clinton replaced the senior Bush in the White House.

Recently, some of George W. Bush's advisors have been quoted privately as worrying that their boss may follow the path of his father if the U.S. economy continues to falter into next year. At the same time, the junior Bush poses some advantages and some problems that his father did not experience. One advantage that Bush has repeatedly invoked is patriotic fervor stirred by the "war on terrorism" after the 9/11 attacks. Conversely, Bush's exploitation of

that theme has carried him to the far-right of the U.S. political spectrum, and caused him to ignore many home-front problems.

Bush has, for example, become a strident advocate of curtailing civil liberties with an expanded "Patriot Act," as long as the restrictions apply to an ill-defined category of terrorists. (basically, anyone Attorney General John Ashcroft decides is a terrorist). Bush has now been quoted as favoring search warrants without court approval, violating a long-held principle of U.S. law meant to safeguard the sanctity of the home. For every voter who believes such measures are necessary to combat terrorism, others will see an expanded police powers as a threat to civil liberties generally. Some media have featured accounts of people who have been held in solitary confinement for several months without charges of the basis of their Middle Eastern heritage and minor immigration violations.

During his first term, Bush has made a large number of enemies who now vow to vote for practically anyone else. These include a substantial number of Americans who are opposed to the invasion of Iraq (an opposition that grows as more soldiers die with little progress toward reconstruction). While Bush likes to think of the situation in Iraq as resembling the aftermath of World War II (and himself, perhaps as a combination of Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt) the facts at street level invoke Vietnam more and more, day by day.

Perhaps soon Bush will be forced to consider what the Vietnam war did to the presidency of his fellow Texan, the Democrat Lyndon Johnson. In 1964, Johnson won a very one-sided election against Barry Goldwater. By 1968, he refused to run again, correctly deducing that the Vietnam war made him unelectable. Iraq could yet (invoking a metaphor popular in the U.S. South) become Bush's "Tar Baby," a problem he just cannot escape.

Bush's opponents also include fiscal conservatives who are very concerned about rapidly rising federal debt (possibly \$500 billion or more next year), as well as environmentalists who object to his gutting of the Environmental Protection Agency and repudiation of the Kyoto Protocol, and teachers, who dislike increasing regimentation of public education via increasing testing of students. At the same time, money for local needs, including schools, is being cut. In Omaha, for example, as Congress debated Bush's request for \$87 billion for a new year's support of the war, the city's mayor was announcing the closing of public libraries and swimming pools.

Perhaps enough people will find enough reasons to oppose Bush to cost him the presidency next year. However, on a ballot, we must vote for (as opposed to merely against) someone. That someone has yet to emerge. It could be Howard Dean. It is too early to tell. As analysts of such things often say: in politics, a year is an eternity.