

Let Bush be himself

**Despite being labeled 'The War President,'
Bush is leading the nation with strength, and humanity**

By Les Csorba

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When Sen. John Kerry launched his not-so-veiled attack against President Bush by saying he wanted to restore "trust and integrity" to the White House, he made character central in this campaign. Aware that Bush's strong suit after Sept. 11, 2001, was his resolute leadership and trustworthiness, Kerry made credibility the sine qua non of election 2004. And while Kerry's own veracity is now under examination, Bush must now remind Americans who can be trusted the most to command the war on terror.

In leadership, trust is the deliberate decision voters make to rely on a leader under a condition of risk. In the time of the risks and sacrifices of war, all the great leaders have built trust by displaying resoluteness wrapped in genuine human emotion. During World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill led not only by pledging "never, never, never" to give in, but also by walking the ruins with the brave Londoners who withstood the German bombs. President Abraham Lincoln was determined to fight to the end to save the Union yet spoke emotionally about the human costs of the war. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was aggressive in his drive to defeat totalitarianism, but spoke in spiritual terms about his quest for peace.

The American leader who emerged after Sept. 11 also displayed the unique interplay of steeliness and humanity in a time of war, what many including former CIA Director James Woolsey now aptly call "World War IV." Standing on the rubble of the World Trade Center, Bush became our "War President." And in the Oval Office, days after Sept. 11, Bush struggled with his emotions, telling reporters about how he was consumed with thinking about the families and children. He then reminded them that he "has got a job to do, and I intend to do it ..." When asked about the development of his son's leadership, President George H.W. Bush told me that "adversity can diminish a person," but it has always given his son a "certain resiliency," making him "a stronger, more principled leader." Perhaps those tears in the Oval Office following Sept. 11 spilled from the pond of tears collected over the years from life's other agonizing moments—from his struggle with alcohol, from the panic upon hearing the news about his wife's toxemia and "high-risk pregnancy" with their twins, and from the childhood memory when his little sister did not come home from a hospital.

From that emotional instant, Bush rose to the occasion, what he poignantly called the "middle hour of our grief." The American people looked in that mirror that day and saw a picture of themselves: a grown man, burdened with the grief at the loss. At that moment, almost 80 percent of the American people said that they could trust the president.

We know that leaders are worthy of trust for at least three reasons. One, they develop a track record of reliability over a long period of time; two, they do not make bad decisions willfully or

consciously; and three, they build trust by expressing their shared humanity with followers.

The burden imposed by the UN was always upon Saddam Hussein to give account for his alleged weapons of mass destruction stockpiles and programs after the 1991 Gulf War. The president's daily threat assessment briefings following the devastation of Sept. 11 included recently revealed Russian intelligence from President Vladimir Putin (passed on to Bush) that demonstrated that Hussein was planning additional terrorist attacks on the U.S. Considering this, and in the face of weapons of mass destruction intelligence (universally accepted by President Bill Clinton, Sens. John Kerry and Edward Kennedy, the UN, France and Germany), Bush wasn't about to trust in the dictator's altruistic claims.

Yet despite other salient arguments for war (human rights and the removal of a thug), Bush's credibility still hangs in the balance. Many still believe that his "rush to war" is evidence of his ideologically stubborn nature.

Leading up to World War II, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt thought that her husband's friend and ally, Winston Churchill, was far too ideological and impetuous--precisely the concerns about Bush today. But after the war, she said: "I shall never cease to be grateful to Churchill for his leadership during the war." Indeed, it was Churchill's grandson, Winston S., who noticed that Bush has what his grandfather had, an ability to get to "the root of the matter"--an ability to confront the important matters of the day head on.

On the matter of serving as commander in chief in this World War IV, Bush's cast-iron will has yet to show any rustiness. Yet the trust Bush built remains covered with scaffolding.

Despite the successes in crippling Al Qaeda, and not being hit since Sept. 11, those who see him as the reckless warrior and not the grieved leader they embraced after Sept. 11 now doubt Bush. Peggy Noonan, a speechwriter for President Ronald Reagan and the first President Bush, is incisive when she writes, "In the world we live in, a leader must seem almost palpably yearning for life and peace even as he makes tough decisions that will soon deny either or both to some." Americans must begin to see again the leader who demonstrated both resolve and empathy; a commander who wants to kill terrorists and end the enslavement of terrorism's fear, yet also a man who more deeply desires to give a new birth to peace and freedom.

Perhaps, in a time of unleashing the weapons of war on the enemy, it is inherently difficult to recognize the empathy of the man who walked with us through the "middle hour of our grief." So, we must be reacquainted with the "little things" of his leadership. Yes, even his "sensitive" side must be seen.

Karen Hughes, Bush's closest counselor, reminds of the times when on a campaign swing in 2000 presidential candidate Bush sent her home to Austin, Texas. One night her then-12-year-old son was playing in a baseball game that could decide the championship. Bush told her to go, but Hughes protested as she worried about fulfilling her professional responsibilities to him. But he insisted. This, too, is our president, not just the commander in chief executing his war plan.

Hughes, who initially traveled to Washington with Bush, returned to Texas to be with her husband and her son. This speaks admirably of her, but also volumes of her leader, who doesn't view himself larger than those he leads.

There are other little things ... like when Bush visited Lebanon, Ohio, earlier this year and interrupted his visit with the town's dignitaries to greet Ashley Faulkner, who lost her mom in

the Sept. 11 attacks. Instinctively, he reached for the teenager, clutched her head, placed it on his chest ... and just held her.

Come to think about it, these are not such little things, but huge solitary moments that speak legions. Bush will finish what the terrorists started--insensitive or not. But just below the war armor is a man tenderhearted and reassuring. His trust can still be fully restored if Americans are reminded of Bush the man, and not just Bush the "War President."

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