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The MBA Goes to Washington: Managing the CEO Presidency

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THE MBA GOES TO WASHINGTON:
MANAGING THE CEO PRESIDENCY

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With the earliest rumors from the political grapevine that the Republican Party had ended its protracted search for the ideal presidential candidate that would cap their stunning takeover of the House in 1994, unabashed and enthusiastic consensus was taking hold for a certain Texas governor and oldest heir to America's current political dynasty.

George W. Bush, the namesake of the former president, was busy solidifying the foundation of a presidential persona that would propel him onto the national stage through subtle but deliberate linkages to some of Ronald Reagan's most endearing characteristics. With his casual air of confident competence and Reagan's populist conservatism - retooled with a twinge of nebulous "compassion" - George W. Bush meandered about the hills of his Texas ranch clearing brush clad in cowboy garb. Occasionally he would engage the press pool to extol his smaller government, lower taxes, and personal freedom mantra in his acquired southern draw that would deflect any hints of his Yankee upbringing at Andover, Yale and Harvard (to say little of his summers spent hanging around his father's cadre of Republican elite on the shores of exclusive Kennebunkport).

It was quite clear then that this soon-to-be president and his handlers had pulled off an act of genius in molding a compelling image as the quintessential everyman Texan who delighted in watching aristocrats get upstaged by the street smart. He emitted a familiar, soft undertow of detached disdain for big government that was a hallmark of Reagan's persona.

Behind the well-honed public veneer of this self-anointed Reagan heir stood a son of privilege who, despite a checkered business career that included several failed ventures, had garnered formidable political acumen that would enable him to leverage the lessons of his business school education and two terms as Texas governor into becoming America's first MBA president. Such a propensity for all things political was formed, in no small part, by two generations of businessmen-politicians in his life: his father and grandfather, U.S. Senator Prescott Bush. Young George W. earned his stripes as an apprentice for his father's Senate, House and presidential campaigns in addition to consulting for U.S. Senate campaigns in Florida and Alabama.

What experiences converged to inform the leadership style of our CEO president? Can leadership skills honed within a business context translate to the formation and implementation of effective public policy? How has George W. Bush applied his management training to governing in order to address the unique challenges of our time? How successfully has he communicated his agenda in this new era of 'affirmation journalism'; niche, mixed media; the disenfranchised media 'elite'; and the profitable yet polarizing "argument culture"?

Leading in business vs. making the business of government work

To understand how traditional business training may be applied to the workings of public policy, it is helpful to grasp some of the fundamental similarities and differences between the two. After all, historically speaking, there isn't much to go on when it comes to MBA presidents.

As the highest-ranking administrative authority within a privately- or publicly-held organization (limiting our comparisons to the corporate model), the CEO presides over a diverse but interdependent portfolio of strategic functionality - from financial performance, legal and regulatory concerns to product innovation and competitiveness, human capital, and stakeholder wellbeing. There is arguably no more critical a responsibility in balancing the priorities of such a multi-dimensional agenda than maintaining and growing shareholder value.

Whether shareholders comprise actual holders of stock in a publicly held enterprise or represent various investors and channel partners in a privately held venture, businesses survive or die more often by the single measure of deliverable value to those who have expended the personal resources that enable its very existence.

CEOs are expected to lead an organization - its internal resources and external stakeholder groups - toward continual value enhancement as they may define it. They put their business training to work in service of the organization's wellbeing through a variety of operational mechanisms - strategic planning and competitive analysis, due diligence, crisis preparedness, cost controls, process compliance, inventory management, channel partnerships, resource acquisition, and information networks, to name a few.

Government, on the other hand, is responsible for not just material assets or value delivery but literally life and liberty. While business operates within an open, level (the ideal) playing field of competitive free markets, government is charged with the security and maintenance of the system's fundamental components. Leaders in this context must balance the imperatives of checks and balances with national defense, criminal justice, and other involuntary transactions executed from a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. While business and government by nature pursue self-interested agendas, economic self-interest can be simpler than the complex, often inherently conflicting obligations government has for ensuring a holistic way of life. More than in business, the *politics* of governing is central to reconciling multiple goals in order to deliver their product or service: consent, security, liberty, prosperity, justice and virtue, among others. Politics in government, more than money, creates the accountability and motivation for good performance - particularly in the executive branch. While business and government are charged with delivering their respective notions of value, business exists to compete for profit and grow equity for stakeholders while government exists to ensure accessibility and opportunity within a framework of accountability and fair game.

Unlike a corporate chief executive who must answer to a board of directors and shareholders, President Bush is accountable to the public at large and, in some fashion, to America's international constituency. Governing a nation is far more complex than the most diversified multi-national company with many political, economic and social goals.

What are we setting our presidents up for, given the complexity and speed of change in our modern world? In "The Political Presidency: Practice of Leadership from Kennedy Through Reagan" (Oxford University Press, 1984), Barbara Kellerman concludes that the American presidency has evolved to consist of a multitude of concurrent "chief" roles: Head of state, top executive, primary commander and first diplomat to lead legislator, head of party, voice of the people, protector of the peace, manager of prosperity, and not the least, leader of the free world! Kellerman groups these "chief" responsibilities in three strategic portfolios: the "Foreign Affairs Presidency, the Domestic Presidency, and the Economic Presidency."

Kellerman also observes that the American public, the political elite, and our international constituencies have historically placed "extraordinary" demands on our chief executive, requiring him "over and over again to prove himself to be all things to all (people)." We have expected our presidents to engage in "crisis management, symbolic and morale-building leadership, priority setting and program design, recruitment leadership, legislative and political coalition building, program implementation and evaluation, and general oversight," while also being "an expert on everything from clean air to neutron bombs…"

Richard E. Neustadt argues in "Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership from FDR to Carter" (New York, Wiley; 1980) - the sequel to his 1960's seminal volume of the same title - that the Constitution does little to bestow presidential power, nor do powers bestowed on the president by Congress establish clear authority. The president's power must be derived from any "extra-form ones" that he can marshal on his own.

The ironic Bush: B-school training, faith, and a dubious career history

One of the great ironies of George W. Bush is that his training at Harvard Business School, followed by a short foray into the business world, provided him with only a limited chance to season theory with real practice during the most turbulent and transformational decades in corporate America. And now he has been dropped into the most challenging management job in the world.

It is widely documented that Bush, who dashed off to Midland Texas from Cambridge in pursuit of becoming an oil "wildcatter", never had a real opportunity to fully apply his B-school lessons in the power of nuanced, fact-based analysis. Arbusto Energy Inc., which he founded in 1977, was backed heavily by wealthy and prominent family friends. The company had average luck in its drilling ventures, but never made a major discovery. Arbusto, along with Bush's other business ventures, lost money - although they did earn value as tax shelters. The one profitable exception was the Texas Rangers, where Bush served as managing partner.

According to James Carney and John F. Dickerson - with reporting by Michael Duffy in Washington ("Inside the Mind of the CEO President"; *Time* and *CNN.com*; July 29, 2002) - the president acquired his "benevolent" view of corporate America from those early years in the oil business: "There, Bush recalls, businesses were filled with 'good men' who would strike a deal on a handshake or the strength of a family name.

When the oil boom went bust, as it did for Bush in the mid-1980s, small-business men didn't cash out their stock options and run; they took pay cuts and tried to help their employees. To Bush, Enron and WorldCom were aberrations, the fault of a few bad actors in an otherwise sound system." The reporters add that, Bush "remains distrustful and not a little dismissive of the investment bankers who swooped into Texas with saddlebags full of cash when oil prices gushed but galloped out of town when prices sank. Corporations and businessmen who produce things are the backbone of the economy, while the markets and investors are a vaguely sinister sideshow."

Another aspect to the president's leadership formation and one not frequently assessed, is the character of his Harvard Business School education. When Bush entered Harvard, the business school phenomenon was still relatively new. "The MBA was invented in the Progressive era as a way to abort future generations of robber barons," chronicles Charles R. Kesler, a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College, in "President wanted, MBA not required; Why the government isn't a business" (*Los Angeles Times*; July 3, 2006). "The idea was to train a class of business administrators (the ethos was anti-entrepreneurial) who would expiate capitalism's sins by managing their corporations in keeping with higher morality. The higher morality was whatever the spirit of the age revealed to professors and high-toned Protestant ministers." Kesler notes that over time, the B-school "pursuit of ethical uplift waned, and the pursuit of efficiency and new methods of reading a balance sheet waxed," giving more emphasis to trend analysis that was the fodder of modern management books.

In an opinion piece, "Hail to the Robber Baron?" (*The Harvard Crimson*; April 4, 2005), one of Bush's former professors at Harvard Business School, Yoshi Tsurumi, noted that: "In those days, Bush belonged to a minority of MBA students who were seriously disconnected from taking the moral and social responsibility for their actions. Today, he would fit in comfortably with an overwhelming majority of business students and teachers whose role models are celebrated captains of piracy."

In attributing a business school education to having produced such luminaries of capitalism as former Enron CEO Jeff Skilling as well as the leaders behind the malfeasances of Tyco, HealthSouth, Haliburton, AIG, and WorldCom, Tsurumi cites many executives of corporate America who hold MBAs as having been "engaged in the unethical acts of raiding their corporate treasuries at the expense of employees and stockholders."

When Bush arrived in Cambridge in the mid 70s, Harvard's B-school was pioneering the trend of using case studies that dissected the uncertainty and complexity of actual problems facing real corporations: Teams of students developed solutions and then advocated for them in class by responding to hard-hitting questioning. These "case cracker" exercises were static and usually focused on a snapshot of a company in peril at one moment in time. Such an approach to the training of analytical and decision-making skills instills a lasting impression, training students as general managers who can envision the larger strategic picture, establish priorities, and optimize the functional expertise of colleagues to make decisions and take action. However, this approach also runs the risk of upholding rigidity and assurance - which are counterintuitive to today's unpredictable dynamic of perpetual change. Now leaders are required to let it flow; remaining flexible is vital to the constant reassessment of shifting realities so that you may exercise prudent second-guessing. Such a world requires what Ronald Heifetz, co-founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and co-author Laurie Donald ("The Work of Leadership"; *Harvard Business Review*, January 1997) define as adaptive leadership: "The sort of change that occurs when people and organizations are forced to adjust to a radically altered environment"... which then "challenges the traditional understanding of the leader-follower relationship."

As Heifetz and Donald explain, adaptive leadership encourages intelligence sharing and knowledge management across the enterprise. It requires senior executives to be accountable for their own actions with checks and balances that can easily be applied to subordinates. Such a system must provide tangible incentives for the safe expression of honest assessment based on personal experience. By creating formal mechanisms (such as brainstorming clusters or task forces) for high achieving performers, the natural tensions and inherent conflicts of leadership administration may be addressed and ameliorated. Adaptive leadership works only when individuals are forced to abandon their comfort zones and are challenged to become more interdependent of each other. The tension is that such adaptive traits are counterintuitive to the demonstrated management style of the CEO presidency.

Another factor in the leadership formation of George W. Bush is his well-publicized journey of religious faith. Although it is a topic worthy of its own paper, there are compelling characteristics that helped shape his managerial ethos worth noting here.

For one thing, the president's admitted reliance on gut feel and instinct produces a mindset of certainty that one encounters in most religiosity - Christian or otherwise. Such certainty is prevalent with the biblically literal, evangelical Protestantism that Bush now follows, as opposed to the liberal-leaning, theologically ambiguous tradition of his father's Yankee Episcopalism.

But what is more fascinating is how "faith" as a presiding conceptual framework in the president's personal life has transformed his professional "calling". In "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush" (*The New York Times Magazine*; October 17, 2004), Ron Suskind observes that "the president has demanded unquestioning faith from his followers, his staff, his senior aides and his kindred in the Republican Party. Once he makes a decision - often swiftly, based on a creed or moral position - he expects complete faith in its rightness."

Suskind also takes note of a "writ of infallibility" that guides the inner life of the Bush White House and, as we have seen on occasion, can become public during high-pressure moments when his leadership - particularly with regard to policy implementation and follow through - is called into question. "The faith-based presidency is a with-us-or-against-us model that has been enormously effective at, among other things, keeping the workings and temperament of the Bush White House a kind of state secret."

Another nugget of the Bush irony is how the administration's meshing of the interests of organized faith with executive leadership may have come back to haunt them, given the recent admission by Republican Party insiders that the White House's long-proclaimed affinity with evangelical Christians may have been nothing more than "lip service" served up via smart politics.

Focus, decide and delegate

In his book, "Team Bush: Leadership Lessons From the Bush White House" (McGraw-Hill; 1st Edition, 2003), author Don Kettl of the University of Pennsylvania and a highly-regarded political scientist specializing in the 'art' of governing, asserts that Bush's strength has been an unfailing ability to "focus on the big issues, decide on the major strategy questions and delegate the details." Kettl's thesis coincides with that written by other presidential scholars on the Bush CEO style. The president prefers to delegate most, if not all, of the detail work - leaving the primary decision-making fodder within specialized portfolios (i.e., economics and national defense).

He maintains a tight schedule of almost military precision, with a preference for short agendas, in order to arrive at strategic decisions quickly from a shallow pool of highly distilled information that's focused on the big picture items.

In steering such a tight ship, he is perpetually forward looking, seldom looking back, and often willing to push complex, controversial policies ahead despite a lack of broad support. Such confidence stems, apparently, from the combination of his temperament, training and life experience that includes, in no small part, to having learned some painful lessons from his father's failed re-election bid. Bush, according to Kettl, is comfortable in focusing on building his team, making them master the details, and framing the issues so that he may arrive at decisions "firmly and without second thoughts."

To his credit, Bush has never hesitated to recruit and retain the smartest, most committed people available for his inner decision-support team. Many of these individuals - from the Vice President, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, and former Secretaries of State Colin Powell and George Schultz (a key advisor in the shadow neo-con team) - have greater presidential raw material than Bush himself. And while surrounding yourself with the brighter and better is a sign of uncommonly strong leadership, critics assert that the recent election is a case in point: Bush's implementation challenges result from entrusting too much authority to a team that is short on diverse, independent thinking.

The presidential irony here is that Bush may end up proving that the concept of government as a business runs counter to successfully leading the business of the government - and for a reason. The free market system requires clear, hard-coded efficiencies for business to transact seamlessly whereas governing a civil society via a constitutional framework is a messy business, involving constant refinement because it is necessarily a discovery in progress.

Cracks in the veneer

There have been many approaches to presidential leadership exercised throughout our history. Some have proven to be most effective while others ended up as particularly disastrous for both the chief executive and the country. The success of all presidents, naturally, is shaped in large part by the tenor and the circumstances of their times.

A snapshot of some of our modern chief executives reveals a wide range of executive managerial capabilities. For example, FDR was gifted in rhetoric and political agility. His capacity for optimism and resilience was key to leading the country to victory in World War II. However, his weak conceptualization skills and abundant self-assurance led him to act on untested intuitions, producing a disjointed response to the Great Depression.

Harry Truman is admired today for his ability to remain steady while leading during a politically tumultuous period. His successful brokering of the Marshall Plan remains his greatest legacy. Nevertheless Truman was short on good rhetoric and lacked a clear vision for communicating, leaving historians to characterize his term as a situational presidency.

Dwight Eisenhower entered the White House with an unusually high degree of self-worth and uncommon historical stature as a decorated World War II hero. His presidency exemplifies the candidate whose substantial leadership equity shaped the office going in, rather than being made by the job itself. Often coined the "caretaker presidency", Ike's deficits in the bully pulpit of public communication contributed to policy failures such as the Cold War missile race with the Soviet Union.

Conversely, John Kennedy is considered the greatest orator of our modern presidents and arguably of most 20th century American leaders. His formidable skills of persuasion played to his advantage in earning the critical public support needed to recover from the set backs of the Bay of Pigs and the erection of the Berlin Wall. Kennedy's keen sense of history and high intelligence combined to produce some well-informed policy initiatives, but his lack of an overarching vision for a policy with the Kremlin contributed to the misunderstanding that brought about the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Lyndon Johnson is deemed to be the most politically savvy of modern chief executives, bringing to his White House years a well of relationships from Capitol Hill that enabled him to produce an unprecedented amount of legislative achievements. However, his intimidating personal style and deficiencies in organizational matters led to his relying upon an advisory process that failed to produce counsel that spoke truth to his power. As a result, he did not receive the vigorous input required for making the best decisions during the escalating crisis in Vietnam.

There is likely no recent example more instructive in both positive and negative characteristics of chief executive leadership than Richard Nixon. His international achievements were of the grandest scale, particularly the opening of relations with China, and his domestic initiatives were equally innovative, such as the establishment of the EPA. However, his second term was marred by criminal activity that manifested in part from acute paranoia. Such triumphs and utter failures indicate a dysfunctional, if not pathological, psyche that poisoned his White House organization and enabled a pattern of self-sabotaging behavior.

Gerald Ford's term was earned by default from assuming office following Nixon's resignation. While short, Ford's presidency illustrates how accumulating the right experience can coalesce into an effective management style in time of crisis. As a long-time leader in Congress who was widely respected on both sides of the isle, Ford was not easily intimidated by the demands of the job and served unselfishly to make courageous - if not politically suicidal - decisions for the greater good of the country. His quietly confident management style brought about a national healing.

Jimmy Carter was unwilling to participate in the give and take of politics for good policy's sake. Such a shortfall in his otherwise formidable skill set was avoidable and ended up bogging his administration down in minutia and pettiness that did not earn the support needed for success. The one exception is the Camp David accord, where Carter's penchant for being a solo act made that opportunity in political creativity work in his favor.

As the "great communicator", Ronald Reagan exhibited an endearing graciousness in his personal style that he leveraged quite effectively on the national and international stage, most demonstrably in his stunning foreign policy achievements. By focusing his agenda on a handful of strategic priorities, he avoided the scrutiny of more exacting managers - garnering a label as the "Teflon president." Reagan was also considerably uninformed on the substance of his policies and his hands-off management style spawned internal and counter-productive rivalries amongst his closest advisors.

Like Reagan, George H.W. Bush was the antithesis of his predecessor. While not known for his bully pulpit poetics, he was a master of the specifics of policy and politics, exuding competence in office that produced record high public approval ratings for his job performance - up to a point. Unfortunately his aristocratic pedigree left a gap in the common touch and his custodial presidency was doomed to failure when faced with the demand of responding to ordinary American's (economic) pain.

Bill Clinton exhibited an extraordinary gift for political leadership in tension with near-fatal personal flaws. His resiliency in sticking to tough decisions, such as raising taxes and advancing global free trade, contrasted with his ironic tendency to cut and run on lesser issues when the politics didn't serve his interests. Such a dichotomy brought about a perpetual questioning of his personal integrity, which was exacerbated by the Lewinsky-Jones scandal. Clinton's disorganized White House resembled a graduate school seminar with its penchant for drawn out debates, which bogged down his executive decision-making.

In the case of our profile subject, George W. Bush, his detached approach to executive leadership stresses delegation and team cohesiveness rather than heavy involvement in the comprehension of policy nuance or the acquiring of expertise in how the business of government works.

The president's characteristic self-certainty and boldness, and his readiness to advance ambitious policies before there is clear indication of broad support, is admired by business leaders who recognize the potential advantages of judicious risk taking. Bush displays a courageous leadership that earns their respect. He shares their philosophy that 'the best defense is a good offense' - premised upon the notion that winning in business requires being first and operating preemptively. Evidence of the successful application of this strategy in business is everywhere - Microsoft, America On Line and Wal-Mart to name a few.

Nevertheless there are cracks in the veneer. Author Don Kettl warns of the pitfalls Bush has already fallen in to - such as oversimplifying, overreaching and detachment - that are now proving to "trip him up and even cripple his presidency." While the "cripple" part remains debatable, Kettl considers Bush a "high-stakes gambler" for the way his team is often quite convinced of the rightness of their initiatives and frequently overestimates their political strength in garnering public support.

Kettl notes that Bush may have avoided some hazards up to a point from the administration's tendency to often "debate in secret, decide-in-a-flash." However, such secrecy also lends itself to discounting political roadblocks further ahead. By failing to incorporate perspectives outside of the inner core, the benefits of good consensus building are left untapped.

Certainly the 2006 mid-term elections delivered a set back for Bush on a scale that will be difficult, if not impossible, to recover from with two lame duck years remaining in his second term. Ron Suskind, in his 2004 *New York Times Magazine* piece, may have foretold of the fate that was awaiting any leader who clings to self-certainty. He reported that almost from the time he assumed office in 2001, Bush exhibited a "cluster of particularly vivid qualities" that have remained fixed: "a disdain for contemplation or deliberation, an embrace of decisiveness, a retreat from empiricism, a sometimes bullying impatience with doubters and even friendly questioners." Suskind further observed that the president's "intolerance of doubters has, if anything, increased…" as if he were saying to subordinates, "Have faith in me and my decisions, and you'll be rewarded."

This notion of "have faith in me" is a recurring them in the assessments of Bush by other presidential scholars, such as Fred Greenstein, who heads the leadership studies program at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Greenstein observes that the president's lack of tolerance for staff disputes during meetings results in "Bush's deliberative processing" leaving "something to be desired" despite scoring otherwise high marks for his organizational abilities.

Greenstein was quoted from remarks made at a 2003 conference on Bush's presidency at the Woodrow Wilson School by former Nixon White House Counsel John W. Dean, who reported on it in the first of a two-part series assessing the MBA presidency (*FindLaw.com*; Friday, November 7, 2003).

The assessments by Greenstein as well as other contemporary presidential scholars - including Dean himself - not surprisingly coincide with Barbara Kellerman's judgment that despite their flaws our modern chief executives are expected to manage an extraordinary portfolio of responsibilities. It is also not insignificant that such job "duties" require a skill set that is rarely, if ever, a pre-requisite for success in the more linear realm of a senior executive post at a major corporation.

In addition to Kellerman's numerous "chief" roles previously cited, Greenstein sees six essential "job requirements" for the chief executive: the personal qualities of "emotional intelligence" and "cognitive style," along with the leadership qualities of "public communication," "organizational capacity," "political skills," and "policy vision." He assigns high grades to Bush on emotional intelligence, considering the president's years of alcohol abuse which could make him prone to being "an emotional tinderbox," but scores him low for "cognitive style" - finding that Bush is not "well equipped to reason clearly about the complex tradeoffs presidents typically have to make." Almost in spite of the frequent Reagan comparisons, Greenstein cites Bush as "in a league of political masters like Lyndon Johnson" stemming from his "congenitally gregarious" nature and knowing "that if a leader does not set his own goals, others will set them for him." Yet he also notes a tone of hard edge partisanship in his administration that was not evident in Texas - a tone that is now, demonstrably, being reassessed as a result of the mid-term elections.

When it comes to his fellow business leaders, not all of them are impressed by the MBA president, according to a report by Kim Clark, "Grading the M.B.A. President: Does Bush's Business-School Style Hold Too Few Accountable?" (*U.S. News*; April 3, 2006). Clark sampled business leaders for their assessment of Bush's CEO style and several expressed concern for what they saw as typical MBA flaws, such as "overconfidence and failing to hold key advisors accountable." According to Roger Enrico, former CEO of PepsiCo and now Chairman of DreamWorks Animation, if his own subordinates delivered such disappointing results, he would do some firing. While others cited Bush's "mastery at creating and selling his vision," they also take note of his struggle with execution.

Stanford management professor Jeffrey Pfeffer was quoted as saying that the mistakes he sees Bush making "are extremely typical of those being made in corporate America": Faith in their own abilities and theories blinded them to legitimate criticism. And as Clay Risen wrote in "Business Failure: The Decline of the MBA Presidency" (*The New Republic*; July 11, 2006), "He ran on that brand - and, in turn, that brand has haunted him repeatedly as a favorite trope for conservatives trying to explain why his popularity, and his agenda, have tanked."

With deference to the president given the demands of the job, and despite his unprecedented B-school training, one must question if American's expectations for their chief executive are realistic. And conversely, to what extent does this president - given his crafty image making as the self-evident inheritor of the Reagan legacy - bear responsibility for setting himself up for such a scope of value delivery?

All leadership models have their weaknesses but the MBA, or management model, can be prone to gaps in topical knowledge or expertise critical to foresee the contingency options that are required in acute situations, such as the Iraq war. B-school students are ingrained with the confidence that they can manage anything since topical expertise is delegated as a domain of portfolio deputies.

In business, results are everything, and the means to getting there can be overlooked if the score ends up in your favor. Government is not so linear. Iraq is not an isolated Bush failure. The Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and the Department of Homeland Security, new agencies launched by the Administration, are still struggling to gain a footing.

There are well-documented charges that the White House engages in a pattern of undermining federal workers by politicizing objective and analytic functions (at the CIA, the FDA, and NASA, for example). Management disasters, such as the response to Hurricane Katrina and the botched Dubai port deal, have dealt severe blows to the MBA president's credibility. The administration failed to overhaul Social Security but added a $534 billion prescription drug benefit while over five million Americans lost their health care coverage. In walking away from his pledge to abolish the Department of Education (as called for in the Republican Party's 1996 platform), Bush expanded its reach with the costly "No Child Left Behind" Act. And during the president's term, even non-defense, non-discretionary federal spending has grown 27 percent - from $343 billion to some $436 billion thus far - all while the country has lost 2.7 million manufacturing jobs.

"The MBA president has neglected to tell the American people that official budget projections rest on unrealistic projections of future revenues, underestimates of future spending, and obfuscation of future pension liabilities," stresses Laura D'Andrea Tyson in "The White House Is No Place for Voodoo Accounting" (*Business Week*; September 23, 2002). "These are exactly the kinds of accounting tricks that have gotten CEOs into trouble and are now the focus of accounting reform in Corporate America."

Managing the message is managing the agenda?

Clearly an historical benchmark was achieved with the arrival of the first MBA presidency at a time when communications technology, mixed media, and the new niche - affirmation journalism - had reached a prolific state. While the Clinton administration is widely credited in optimizing new information technology for its policy initiatives, those advantages then are dwarfed by today's new opportunities in a far richer landscape.

The CEO president has been quick and deliberate in building an infrastructure from which his administration has converted executive branch governance into a sort of perpetual campaign characterized by impressive message discipline, narrowly-focused policy promotion strategies, aggressive niche media coalition building and, arguably, heavy-handed disintermediation of the mainstream media elite - notably those inside the beltway.

A particular characteristic of the Bush administration's communication strategy is how they have made campaigning a permanent, core function of White House operations. While Michael Deaver capitalized on the arrival of live satellite news gathering technology to stage stunning metaphorical imagery for Ronald Reagan - and Bill Clinton's team leveraged his policy prowess to implement an "issue of the day" strategy that drew media in to daily roll-outs so that more backroom work could proceed below radar - George W. Bush has executed the perpetual campaign like a CEO pumping up the investing public for an IPO.

The president has engaged in one of the most precise, micro-focused media strategies of any modern politician. In essence, it is the equivalent of a CEO's marketing communications program for a sequence of product launches. Conceived in large part by Karl Rove on mechanics (a doggedly methodical direct marketer who can exploit the psychological drivers of any demographic equation) and Karen Hughes on message (who knows the president's soul inside and out), they are what Ed Rollins was to Reagan and Bob Shrum still is to Ted Kennedy.

In placing Rove at the helm of the new Office of Strategic Initiatives, Bush granted unprecedented proximity and access to the Oval Office for his direct marketing communications strategy. Critics assert that this move proves the president was willing to mix the politics of the perpetual campaign with the policy mechanism of running the government. One outfit perpetuates the base and fund-raising operation to ensure election competitiveness while the other serves, arguably, the competing interest of executive branch leadership to drive policy formation and legislative success.

The later is supposed to serve the broadest interests of the American people, devoid of political biases, but with most of his presidency having enjoyed the rare control of all three branches, Bush has not been compelled to govern from the political center.

During his term, contracts for public relations services with the federal government have gone from $39 million to $88.2 million, according to Democratic staff of the House Government Reform Committee. With such substantial funds at their disposal, the administration has retained top PR practitioners with what critics charge is a view toward the media as propagandists rather than independent inquisitors.

Every administration blurs the line between salesmanship and manipulation. While team Bush's tactics have been used by previous administrations, critics claim the MBA president is driven by the combative competitiveness instilled from his business school training, and the lessons of his father's failures, to push the practice of presidential PR into new territory that is testing its limits. A particularly favorite technique is to screen the audience who attend meetings that appear to have a town-hall format and bypassing the national press corps to go directly to local media who will cooperate more for a local exclusive that drives up their ratings.

Historically, presidents have always sought to manage the news by denying access to journalists. One of the most notorious examples of presidential interference was Richard Nixon. Infuriated by coverage of the Watergate scandal, he ordered his staff to bar any representative from the New York Times, the Washington Post, Time Magazine, Newsweek, CBS, and UPI from the press pool. While his staff ignored the order, Nixon often telephoned media company owners to get reporters fired.

"The White House and its supporters are... taking aggressive action," charges Eric Alterman in "Bush's War on the Press" (*The Nation*; May 9, 2005)... "preventing journalists from doing their job by withholding routine information; deliberately releasing deceptive information on a regular basis; bribing friendly journalists to report the news in a favorable context; producing their own 'news reports' and distributing these free of charge to resource-starved broadcasters; creating and crediting their own political activists as 'journalists' working for partisan operations masquerading as news organizations."

Eric Boehlert, writing for *Salon.com* ("Tearing down the press; March 2, 2005) asserts that the administration "is expert at managing information, using secrecy, carrots and sticks, and carefully crafted talking points to control the news... (they have) been at war with the media from Day One."

In his piece, Boehlert quotes David Brock, CEO of Media Matters for America, for pointing out that the White House's ultimate aim is to raise doubts about the information independent journalists produce. "Their explicit goal is to get us to the point where there are blue (state) facts and red (state) facts," says Brock. "Of course, the public's erroneous beliefs could be the result of simple ignorance or its increasing reliance on partisan media outlets, not a conscious plan by the White House. But the two are not mutually exclusive. And the Bush administration's well-documented mastery of cold-blooded political hardball, its record of contempt for journalism, its cavalier willingness to cross ethical lines in dealing with the press, and its arrogant assertion that it alone creates and controls reality, make it difficult to dismiss outright the idea that its approach to the press is strategic, not just tactical."

Judging by the mid-term election results - and the pending turnover in 2008 not only in the White House but in the larger number of incumbent Republicans than Democrats who will face re-election in the Senate - perhaps it is the wannabe Republican successors to the MBA president who might need to get an early start on recalibrating their notion of "reality".

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