

# commentary

from other pens...

## Americans like Bush for personal honesty

By Will Lester

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — President Bush has a relatively strong position in the polls after his first 100 days — a popularity pollsters believe is built largely on his personal appeal and perceptions of his honesty.

“When you’ve got this divided an electorate and it’s this early, it leaves you subject to a defining event either good or bad, which can tend to set your perception,” said Republican pollster Bob Teeter.

“His strength with the public continues to be the perception he is a nice guy and a person of honor,” Democratic pollster Geoff Garin said. “But he has not gained much ground on the two subjects where the voters had the biggest concerns, presidential leadership and caring more about average families than about wealthy corporate interests.”

Democrats have an advertising campaign to drive a wedge between Bush and the public — using issues they think will anger Americans.

One ad shows children talking about arsenic in water and salmonella in meat — referring to recent Bush decisions rolling back regulations on the environment and health later modified under intense criticism. The other ad shows budget cuts tearing away at popular public programs.

“The American people would be better served if the misguided leadership of the Democratic Party were to lower the destructive rhetoric that drives people apart,” said Ann Wagner, co-chair of the Republican National Committee.

Bush ran for president saying he wouldn’t choose his policy positions on the issues based on polls. Bush is pushing many of the same initiatives he championed on the campaign trail and hasn’t altered them to fit the public’s preferences. Democrats claim that’s because he’s beholden to big business and corporate donors, while Republicans say it’s because he has principles.

Republican strategists acknowledge they see plenty of internal polling information, but say it’s used more to develop their message on preset goals than to determine what position to take.

They said the environmental decisions didn’t necessarily cause specific poll problems, but they could have torn down the perception of Bush as “a different kind of Republican.”

Bush ran for president successfully as “a compassionate conservative” — an image that Democrats hope to damage.

“On the surface, everything is A-OK,” said conservative Marshall Wittman of the Hudson Institute. “Beneath the surface there are some disturbing trends. There is a view he is more of a corporate conservative than a compassionate conservative, a perception he favors big business over ordinary Americans.”

Bush’s personal popularity is fueled by the contrast with former President Clinton, Wittman said. “He’s the anti-Clinton, strong where Clinton was weak and weak where Clinton was strong.”

Clinton is given credit as an effective communicator and someone concerned about ordinary Americans, but they didn’t think he was honest.

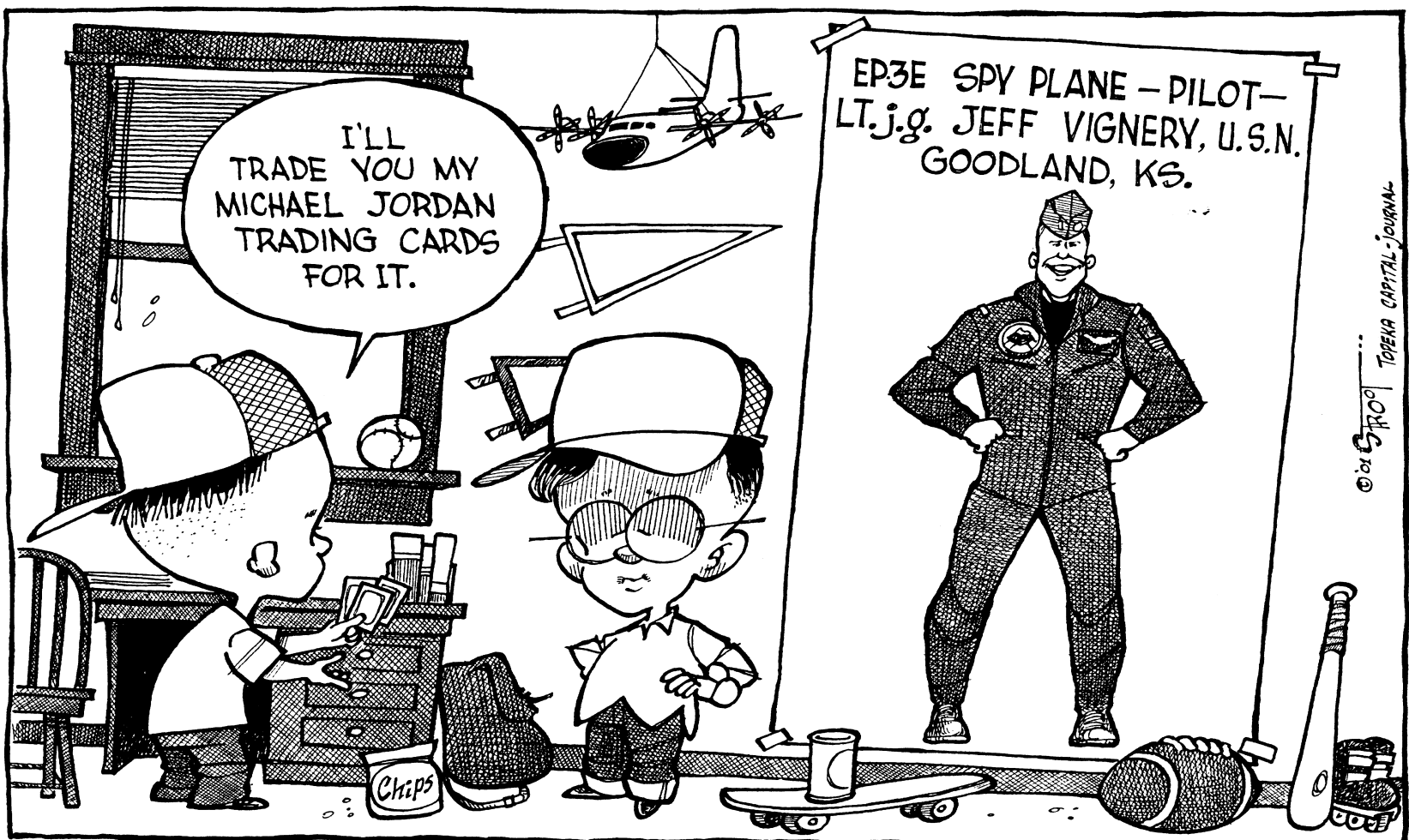
Bush must be careful Democrats don’t use the environmental issues on Bush like Republicans used gays in the military to weaken Clinton. Polls suggest few people were aware of the administration’s decision to stop Clinton-era rules on arsenic in drinking water and its quick reversal on a proposal to ease salmonella testing requirements on meat for school lunches, and the Bush administration has been moving quickly to rehabilitate its image on the environment.

“They were surprised by the reaction on the environment and have been adjusting ever since,” said Thomas Mann, a political analyst.

A Democratic veteran of the White House said he doesn’t buy the position Bush doesn’t use polls to modify his public positions.

“I don’t believe it for a second,” said Leon Panetta, who was a chief of staff to Clinton. “You don’t flip around on environmental positions without some concern about poll results on that issue.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — Will Lester covers polling and politics for The Associated Press.



## Explicit language, scenes not really necessary

I don’t know about you, but I think television and movies are getting worse.

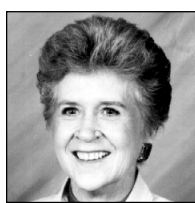
Giving arguments for freedom of speech and expression, the boundaries continue to be pushed. I will never understand why coarse words and literal visuals are preferred as means of illustration. Nothing is left to the imagination. Possibly that is because there is little value placed on imagination anymore. Everything has to be expressed in the most crude, literal way.

“Because that’s the way people talk today,” experts say. Well, maybe that’s right; people do talk that way. But which came first - the explicit shows that give license to that behavior or the behavior itself?

Toys today are graphic and specific, valued as learning tools instead of entertainment and fun. They are extensions of classrooms. Children aren’t encouraged to imagine or pretend. A stick can’t be a magic wand, a pen to write in the dirt, and above all - not a toy gun.

Didn’t you play with toy guns as a child? I did. We pretended to shoot each other; we’d fall down dead for a few minutes; we’d rise to play again. We knew it was all pretend. Guns didn’t have to look like guns; we imagined them.

For me, the more realistic the guns became, the less fun they were. I didn’t appreciate the powerful “rubber guns” (ammunition was sliced-up inner tubes) the neighborhood boys devised that



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could really sting.

We played with guns, but we also knew real from imagined. Movies showed guns that shot people (usually the bad guys), but there wasn’t any blood. We used our imaginations - didn’t have to see life-like blood and gore. And yet, we grew up to be good citizens in a society that had much less violence than today’s.

Learning toys don’t seem to be accomplishing what parents would like them to do. Yes, maybe children are getting smarter, but they’ve lost wonder and imagination.

I don’t see that we were warped by playing with toy guns and swords. We knew they could hurt, and our parents were around to punish us appropriately when enthusiasm overcame our playmates’ security. Toys were taken away, or we were punished by being isolated from friends. We were instructed on appropriate play habits, and we knew there would be stricter rules if we didn’t keep the lesser ones. I don’t remember anyone being “bored.”

Today our children are almost too protected. We

buy learning toys, we pad elbows and knees, we encourage computer activities that stifle imaginations, etc. Children learn caution by making small errors, not by being protected from them. Our children are smarter, but they are also more stressed out.

They are full of information, but struggling over morals and values. We weren’t better when we were kids; we were just allowed to be kids. We weren’t as street-smart or technology-literate, but we weren’t expected to be. Our teen years were called “formative”; we weren’t expected to know it all (even if we thought we did). We were watched over, not warned against strangers.

We didn’t have our own cars; we were allowed to occasionally borrow the only one our parents drove. Privileges were earned and appreciated, and given out according to our behavior and trustworthiness.

The American Dream of giving our children all the things we didn’t have when we were growing up has backfired. We’ve given them lots of material things but in the meantime have robbed them of things that are more important — things like available parents, grandparents who live close by, the imagination to play and work creatively, the innocence to appreciate the simple and the wonderment of discovering things on their own.

Television and movies show our children things they just don’t need to see. They’ll learn about life’s harsh realities soon enough.

## Lighting the path to excellence

If America is on the brink of an education revolution, as the optimist in me believes, we might find a soft-spoken professor named Mel Levine lighting our way.

As I wrote in last Sunday’s column, Levine is a Rhodes scholar, Harvard Medical School grad and a University of North Carolina professor of pediatrics who has devoted his life to understanding how kids learn. The books, videos and workshops that have grown from his institute, All Kinds of Minds, have been attracting ever-increasing attention from educators, media and politicians. In a recent interview, I asked him to describe his ideal school.

“The teachers, he said, would be well trained in how kids learn, and they would be aware that every kid learns differently. “So much of the teachers’ training is curriculum-based rather than kid-based,” Levine said. “They learn how to teach social studies rather than how kids learn social studies.”

“The students would also be well schooled from an early age on how they learn. “Kids would learn about learning while they’re learning,” Levine said. They would be taught how such functions as memory and language and attention work. If they can understand their own brain’s strengths and weaknesses, Levine said, they are better able to use strengths to compensate for weaknesses, thus becoming better problem solvers and decision makers.

“Every child, not just special ed students, would have an Individual Education Plan. This is basically a management plan that spells out the areas in which a student struggles — whether academically, socially or emotionally — and the school’s plan to address them. “It doesn’t have to be extensive,” Levine said. “Just, ‘What are the needs of this child?’”

“On the flip side, there would be a commitment to identifying a student’s strengths and making sure they’re getting stronger. “Even in elementary school, children ought to pick a topic that they’re interested in and study it for three or four years so that by the sixth grade, a particular kid is his school’s leading expert.”

Let’s say a third-grader is passionate about trucks, Levine said. By the time he reaches the sixth grade, he will have written five reports on trucks, done two art projects on trucks and three science projects on trucks. In the process, he has learned what scholarship tastes like.

“I think one of the experiences every child should have is a taste of expertise,” Levine said. “What is it like to know more about something than anyone in your school does, including the teachers? The point is to pursue knowledge in depth and build a lot of skills around that.”



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Also, Levine said, a common thread in the biographies of highly successful people is that as children they all had passions, whether dinosaurs, space or dance.

“There would be a total crackdown on peer abuse. “We have cracked down on chewing gum in school,” Levine said. “Meanwhile, you can humiliate another human being and principals will say, ‘Boys will be boys.’”

“In high school, students would have the option of taking their weakest courses as pass/fail and then push themselves to excellence in their strongest courses. “We shouldn’t be judging people harshly in terms of how they practice other people’s specialties. But you’ve got to be exposed to them,” Levine said.

“But in the classes you’ve selected for grades, we’re going to brutalize you. We’re going to kill you to make you excellent. In a sense, every student would be an honors student in something.”

“There would be more than one way to assess students. Kids who chronically don’t test well could be judged on their accomplishments and productivity.

“If you hand in every single assignment, that ought to be rewarded, as opposed to how you do on tests, which has so much luck and rote memory involved,” Levine said. “The quality is going to come eventually if you stay productive.”

“No student would be slapped with a learning-disability label like “ADD” or “dyslexic.” “We would label the phenomenon that the kids are struggling with rather than the kids themselves,” Levine said.

“The school would find ways to enable every kid to experience at least three of the following: creative accomplishment, motor accomplishment, leadership accomplishment and altruistic accomplishment. For the klutz who might never be motorically accomplished, Levine said, the physical ed teacher ought to train him or her to be a coach, thus avoiding the humiliation of public failure while enhancing leadership skills.

“High school would not focus so myopically on skills needed to get into college but rather on those needed to live a responsible, enriching life. “Right now, high schools are so totally subversive to the SATs, to getting kids into college,” Levine said.

“Kids should go to college, but let’s not make that the end point. There are a lot of really impor-

tant functions that have to be in place for life, and they need to be introduced early.

“And if that becomes obscured by getting a good SAT score, then I think there are wasted opportunities. That’s why I hate the term college prep.”

Even in this political climate, in which high-stakes testing is offered as the answer to every ill, Levine believes his ideas for education are being heard.

“I think it’s a very logical next step in education. What we want to do is produce successful children, and nobody would say there’s only one kind of successful child. So if there are a lot of different ways to be successful, there have to be a lot of different pathways toward that success.”

The first step toward changing the American education system is to believe it can be changed, a commodity in short supply among many politicians.

It’s time for the believers to stand up, all the parents and grandparents and educators, and answer one question: Who will change our children’s education if not us?

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## berry’s world



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