

# commentary

from other pens...

## Bush knocked off stride; history suggests recovery

By Ron Fournier

AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON — A senator's defection. Public relations missteps. Foreign policy surprises. Five months in office, President Bush has suffered a series of setbacks knocking him off his confident stride.

He came into office with an experienced team and the pugnacious pluck determined to seize a mandate. He was the nation's first MBA president, running the government like a business. And then reality.

"They've hit a few bumps in the road," said presidential analyst Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institution. "Suddenly, we see they're not as smart as they thought they were."

Bush loses control of the Senate this week when GOP Sen. James Jeffords officially leaves the party, accusing the president and other Republican leaders of being too conservative.

The defection revealed flaws in Bush's political network and raised questions about Bush's ability to keep moderates in the fold.

It was the biggest miscue in a series of setbacks that suggest Bush is experiencing presidential growing pains. Among them:

— Secretary of State Colin Powell failed to persuade NATO allies to take a step toward endorsing the plan for a national missile defense.

— With no warning, the United States lost its seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council in a secret vote.

— The administration had to abandon a plan to restructure sanctions against Iraq, bowing to Russian and Chinese demands for delay.

— Vice President Dick Cheney, the architect of so many White House initiatives, undermined plans for his energy report by seemingly dismissing conservation programs as "a sign of personal virtue."

— Bush traveled to Los Angeles this week to meet with Gov. Gray Davis after the Democrat accused Bush of having little sympathy for California voters stung by soaring electricity bills.

A senior Republican who works with the Bush team said the president lost some political stature by flying across the country for an audience with a governor. Bush's staff knew the risks, but he had no choice.

He is not the first president thrown off by a learning curve.

Bill Clinton stumbled in the first days of his presidency, moving awkwardly to end the gays-in-the-military ban and withdrawing top nominees under fire.

The first President Bush bragged about not having a 100-day plan, creating the impression that he had no vision or fresh ideas.

Jimmy Carter appointed a staff with precious little Washington experience. Ronald Reagan didn't know his own housing secretary, and misidentified the top House Republican.

Though Bush's missteps are no worse than those of his predecessors, it's worth watching to see how he responds.

Erwin Hargrove, political science professor at Vanderbilt University, said Bush created his own trouble by stubbornly pushing an agenda that is slightly more conservative than the mainstream.

"Is it inexperience? Is it growing pains? Or is it a more serious ineptness? That's the question," Hargrove said. "I think it's simply arrogance. I think it's straight-down arrogant to think they could impose their programs on such an evenly divided Congress without a little more give."

Dismissing such talk, consultants Alex Castellanos and Rich Bond said voters don't pay attention to the U.N. votes and public relations missteps. Americans watch for bigger cues from their president.

And they may soon see some from Bush.

Tax cuts and refunds are on the way. A landmark education bill is moving through Congress. Bush helped free 24 airmen from China, and polls show a majority approve of his job performance.

"He has gotten nicked and cut along the way," Bond said. "But I think you have to give great weight to those big three or four things he's done well — not the minor 10 things that went wrong."

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Ron Fournier has covered national politics and the White House for The Associated Press since 1993.



## Planting success in a young person's future

We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future. - Franklin D. Roosevelt

The future success of America lies not in our wealth of resources, standard of living or political system. Nor will our future accomplishments be created by technology, global marketing or even our free-enterprise economy. The future of America is young men and women.

Don't misunderstand me, free enterprise, technology and natural resources are all important elements of our success. However, this nation's real future is in our youth. These young men and women, armed with knowledge, seasoned with experience and equipped with positive attitudes can and will lead America to even greater heights.

I don't agree with those who are quick to condemn our young people. Though I can't predict how each individual will turn out, I will predict that soon they will become the generation who is worried about how the young people in America will turn out.

This takes me back to the quote I used to open this column. I agree with FDR, we can help our young people become more prepared to deal with the future. In fact, we have a responsibility to do so.

I believe our schools do an adequate to good job in some areas of this "success" training. Other elements that pertain to success are neglected. For some time, my associates and I have discussed and dreamed about a summer camp for high-school students that would focus on business and related



don taylor

- minding your own business

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Etiquette. Yes, Mom, you were right in manners are important. Our campers will discover the principles of table etiquette, master proper introductions and practice writing thank you notes.

## First teacher Cheney blows the test

The attentive parent should always know the teacher. That's especially true when the student is president of the United States.

So let's talk about Dick Cheney and what he's been teaching our boy.

His first assignment was to tutor young George on whom to pick for his vice president. He taught him the evils of picking a Republican moderate who was either pro-choice or anti-Star Wars. Relishing the lesson, Bush picked someone who was pleasantly pro-life and fanatically pro-SDI.

Having assumed the VP's job, Cheney has retained his more vital position as First Teacher. From that catbird's seat, his influence spans as wide as his curriculum. His classes run the gamut from defense to energy to How To Maintain Good Relations With Congress.

Starting with Proper Vice Presidential Selection, the lesson plans have been predictable. Bush is taught to rely on Dick Cheney for his thinking, his strategy, his counsel. Indeed, the vice president is to be his prime surrogate.

Cheney says to focus the Bush energy program on more drilling, more refineries, more pipelines and less whining from the EPA. Bush proves the perfect student, exclaiming with enthusiasm what he finds written in his modest set of notes.

Cheney teaches the ideology of strategic defense with the same gusto. The United States should simply duke it out with the Russians and all the rest of those countries who want to keep the ABM treaty.

In congressional relations, the First Teacher puts forth the same method: our way or the highway. If you can ram a tax bill through Congress, you do it! If you can do it once, you can do it again and again, with energy, strategic defense, and whatever else you'll need to win in 2004.

The defection of Jim Jeffords displays the weakness in the Cheney method. It is all push and no



chris matthews

- commentary

pull. It exploits the zeal of the country's conservative base but fails to lure recruits.

A good teacher would have shown the new president his need for remedial work. One reason candidate George W. Bush lost the New Hampshire primary last year was that he failed to talk substance with the voters. My own fifth-grade daughter noticed that after watching him speak one Sunday afternoon.

Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska criticized Bush last week for doing the same with members of the Senate, trying to woo them with good ole boy malarkey. Instead of mastering the material, Hagel says, Bush relies on nicknaming and towel-snapping.

The charm that worked so well on part-time Texas legislators in Austin does not work so well in Washington.

To build support among the full-time, year-round career professionals in the U.S. Senate, the president needs to dig deep enough into the issues to know where his political problems lie. He needs to focus on the wallflowers as well as the Big Men on Campus. He needs to stop sending "Dick Cheney" to talk to senators, Hagel urgently advises, and go himself, armed personally with the policy knowledge to do the job.

Had he fathomed Jim Jeffords' deep-felt commitment to renewable energy sources, Bush might have connected with the wavering Vermonter.

Perhaps because he didn't, the New Englander

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I'll be addressing the "great opportunity" presented by our free-enterprise economy and entrepreneurship. I see a great future for those who do the right things and do them well.

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who recently comprised the party's leftward flank now sits with the Democrats. The quintet of GOP moderates that once included Jeffords, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins of Maine, is now a quartet.

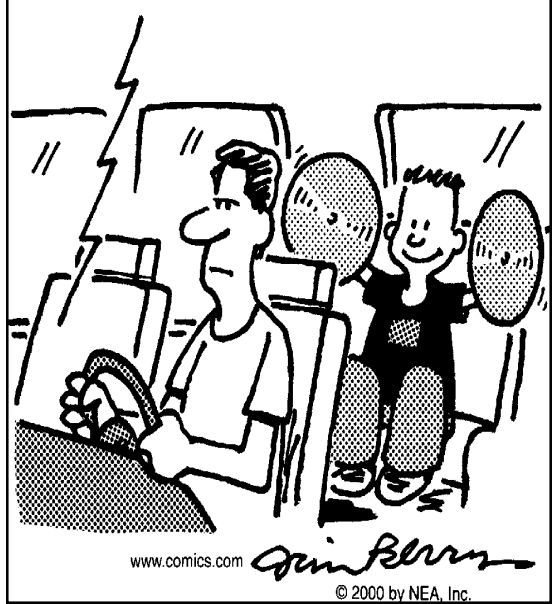
The loss of the Senate majority offers a timely lesson on the weakness of the Cheney method just as the Democrats' loss of Congress in 1994 was a timely warning on the weakness of the Hillary Rodham Clinton method of health care. Each relied too greatly on the presumed mental and moral superiority of the proponent.

The question that lingered during this week of Bush's long-overdue visit to California is whether the student president has absorbed it.

Chris Matthews, a nationally syndicated columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, is host of "Hardball" on CNBC and MSNBC cable channels. The 1999 edition of "Hardball" was published by Touchstone Books.

## berry's world

... SO — ALL YOU DRIVERS OF SUVs OUT THERE — BE AWARE THAT YOUR VEHICLE COULD ROLL OVER IF YOU HEAR THE LOUD, JARRING SOUND OF A TIRE BLOW OUT.



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