

commentary

from other pens...

Doubts about Bush; still trusted leader

Many Americans don't agree with President Bush's policies on the economy and other domestic issues and they're getting less certain about his Iraq policies, polls suggest, but they like him, they trust him and they support his efforts to fight terrorism.

That is keeping his job approval numbers in the 50s. "It does still relate to 9-11," said Frank Newport, editor in chief of the Gallup poll. "They see him as a decisive leader trying to meet the nation's challenges."

Four-in-five in a recent Gallup poll said Bush is willing to make hard decisions, and almost that many described him as a strong and decisive leader. He scores high with the public on trust.

Those good feelings the public has about Bush personally could help him with growing challenges he faces convincing them he has the right approach on Iraq and on the economy.

"These are challenging times, there's no doubt of that," said Karen Hughes, Bush's confidant who left the White House last year to return to Texas, but intends to be a senior adviser on his re-election campaign. "That's one of the things that the president is going to talk about in his State of the Union."

He speaks to the nation Tuesday in the State of the Union address. "The president has an opportunity to do two things that are necessary for the well-being of his administration," said Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

"One is to make the case on Iraq," he said. "It would be good for him to improve confidence in the American public about the future direction of the economy and his stewardship of the economy."

Bush's job approval was at 59 percent in a CBS-New York Times poll, 58 percent in the Pew poll and 54 percent in a new NBC-Wall Street Journal poll, all released Thursday. Several other polls have shown Bush's approval rating in the 50s, still relatively healthy but down from the 90 percent levels it reached after Sept. 11.

"I think that's very strong support both by historical standards and given the fact he did come through such a close election," Hughes said today on NBC's "Today."

While approval of his handling of the campaign against terrorism remains high, the number of people who approve of his handling of foreign policy was half in the NBC-WSJ poll.

The number who approve of his economic policy has fallen below half in several different polls. Pollsters have suggested any policy connected with Bush got increased support because of an extended rally effect after the horror of the terrorist attacks.

While the public's bond with Bush personally remains, their enthusiasm for his policies is gradually waning.

The public's favorable ratings have held up since Sept. 11, said political analyst Stuart Rothenberg. "They like him, trust him and think he's a decent person," said Rothenberg.

He said the White House is clearly on the defensive now. "But given the four-year political cycle, if you're going to step in a hole, this is an all right time to do it," he said.

Bush's approval rating contrasts with growing fears about the economy, said Gallup's Newport.

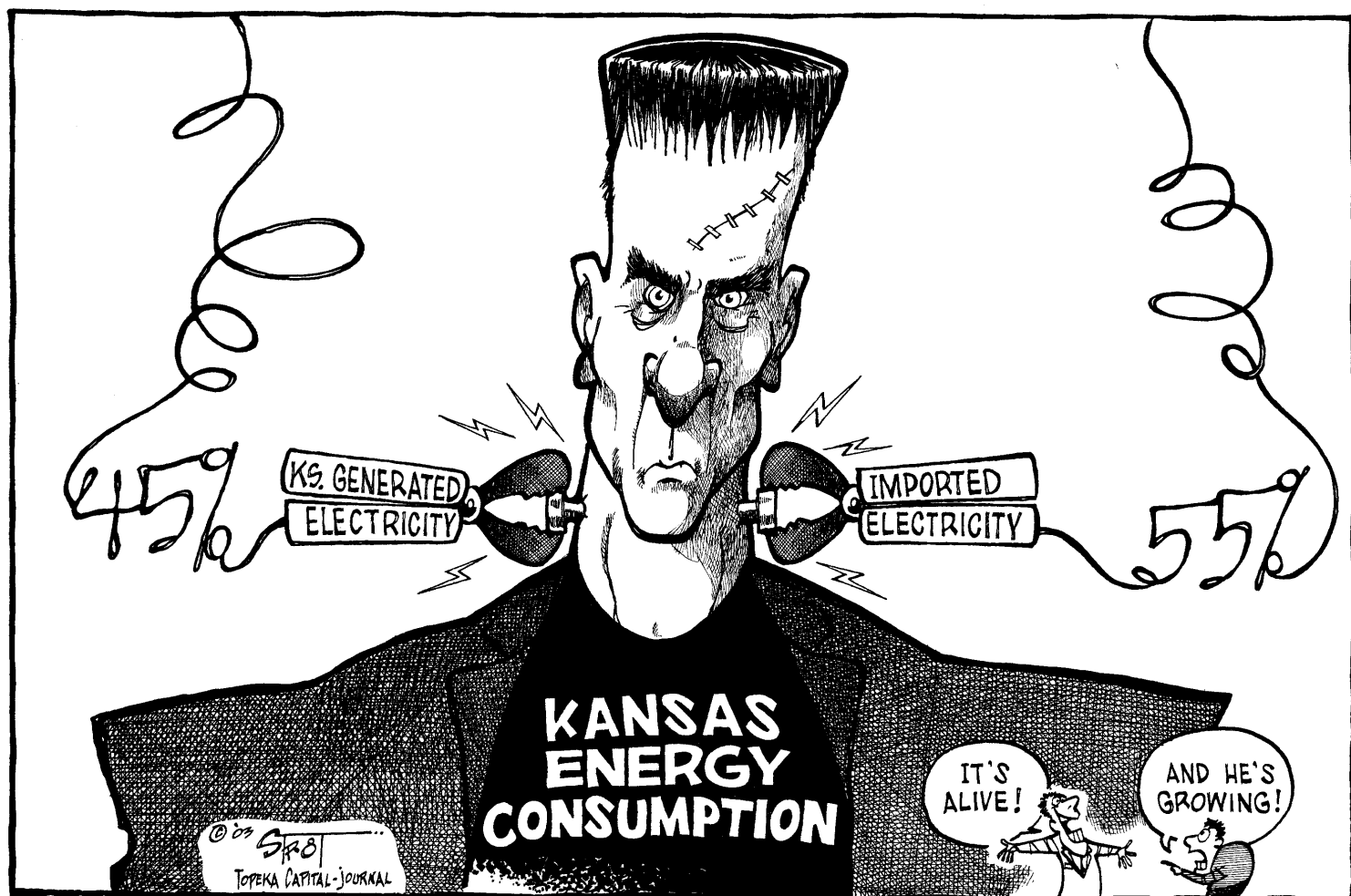
"His average approval last year was in the 70s," Newport said. "Looking at these ratings, it is a drop, but look at the average ratings for presidents," which are in the mid-50s.

Newport said Bush would be in difficulty if his approval rating drops to 29 percent, like his father's did in the summer of 1992.

It's not clear if Bush's personal popularity and his handling of the campaign on terrorism will withstand the doubts on the economy and foreign policy, especially the war on terror.

"People are worried about both of these problems," Kohut said. "And many don't see signs of improvement."

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



I'm becoming alarmed about obesity

I don't know about you, but I (as well as others) am becoming alarmed at the increase of obesity in our country - especially among our young people.

I am concerned for their health as normal aging puts inches on their girth.

Of course there are many exceptions, particularly among the youth who participate in sports.

Too bad so many of us have allowed those active years to pass all too soon, and we show it!

The twentieth century has seen the increase in fat and sugar consumption in our country as never before. Coupled with the labor-saving devices we crave and can afford to own, we are just not doing enough to warrant the food we consume.

I often tell people that I don't eat too much — I just exercise too little. I do very little physical activity, even though every year (and sometimes monthly) I swear to myself that I will change my poor habits. But not declaring it aloud to anyone belies my resolve. If I don't tell anyone, there's no one to berate me when I fail - again!

Lately I was given a little hope for all of us though.

In reading the book *Ragtime* by E.L.



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Doctorow, he tells of the time Taft moved into the White House. America must have had some pretty bad habits then too, or at least the rich of America did.

Doctorow writes: "A momentous change was coming over the United States. There was a new President, William Howard Taft, and he took office weighing three hundred and thirty-two pounds. All over the countrymen began to look at themselves.

"They were used to drinking great quantities of beer. They customarily devoured loaves of bread and ate prodigiously of the sausage meats of poured offal that lay on the lunch counters of the saloons. The august Pierpont Morgan would routinely consume seven-and-eight-course dinners.

"He ate breakfasts of steaks and chops, eggs, pancakes, broiled fish, rolls and butter, fresh fruit and cream. The consumption of food was a sacrament of success. A man who carried a

great stomach before him was thought to be in his prime. Women went into hospitals to die of burst bladders, collapsed lungs, overtaxed hearts and meningitis of the spine.

"All this began to change when Taft moved into the White House. He accession to the one mythic office in the American imaginations weighed everyone down. His great figure immediately expressed the apotheosis of that style of man. Thereafter fashion would go the other way and only poor people would be stout."

It sounds like the people got the message after having to see the enormity of their president and the enormity of the problem. Maybe it's a good lesson for us today. Fast foods and lounging before the TV are habits we need to break. We need to learn to cook for ourselves again.

Parents need to stop asking their children what they want to eat and put food that is good for them on the table. Having the joy of family time together around the table (once the bad habits are eliminated) will be a secondary benefit.

And believe me, you'll miss that togetherness once the children grow up and leave home. At least that's my opinion. I don't know about yours.

Bush advances 'color blind' society

When it comes to advancing Dr. Martin Luther King's goal of a colorblind America, President Bush is ahead of the Democratic Party, even if most African-Americans don't appreciate it.

Bush's opposition to quota-based affirmative action programs at the University of Michigan — combined with his high-level minority appointments — clearly move the country toward a day when people are judged (in Dr. King's famous words) "not by the color of their skin, but the content of their character." Democrats, on the other hand, consistently support preferences based on race — perpetuating race-consciousness — and increasingly use race baiting as a political tactic against Republicans.

African-Americans prefer Democratic candidates over Republicans by a 90-10 margin, but Democrats act as though they fear that Bush might cut into that base vote.

While opposing racial preferences in Michigan and earlier in Texas, Bush has advocated alternative steps to promote diversity that seem to work. And his appointment of two African-Americans, Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, to his administration's top foreign policy positions sends an unmistakable signal that Bush believes in merit selection open to all.

It is Democrats who are constantly playing "the race card." They portrayed the 2000 Florida ballot-counting debacle — which occurred even in upscale, Democrat-controlled counties — as a systematic GOP effort to "disfranchise" blacks.

No Democrat criticized the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's outrageous ad that year likening Bush's refusal to support a new hate crimes law in Texas to the brutal murder of African-American James Byrd.

Last year, even though the White House helped oust then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) after he praised former Sen. Strom Thurmond's (R-S.C.) 1948 segregationist presidential campaign, Democratic leaders systematically portrayed the GOP as bigoted.

As Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) put it, "If anyone thinks that one person stepping down from a leadership position cleanses the Republican Party of their constant exploitation of race, then I think you're naive."

Clinton and other Democrats also repeated stories — which have proved false — that GOP candidates used the Confederate flag as a theme in winning Southern Senate and governorship races last year.

Democrats are currently accusing Bush and



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his conservative 5th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals nominee, Charles Pickering, of being "hostile to civil rights" even though Pickering once fought the Ku Klux Klan and has the support of most Mississippi black leaders.

And, of course, Democrats are saying that Bush's opposition to the University of Michigan's affirmative action programs prove that he is opposed to helping minorities achieve equality.

Even though some Democrats say they oppose "quotas" in affirmative action, in fact the Michigan programs aim to ensure that a pre-set percentage of students are black, Hispanic or American Indian and create preferences for those groups.

As Bush said, correctly, "Quota systems that use race to include or exclude people from higher education are divisive, unfair and impossible to square with the Constitution."

It's inherently unfair to give a preference to the child of a well-to-do black professional and deny a place to a working-class white who may have surmounted hardships to get to college.

Where racial preferences exist, even well-qualified minorities are assumed to be "affirmative action babies" and their achievements are derogated. Less-qualified students often fail academically, experience resentment and blame their lack of success on racial prejudice.

The result is that programs meant to encourage greater interracial understanding — and, ultimately, a color-blind America — end up fostering racial divisiveness.

Still, as Bush noted, ethnic diversity is a legitimate value to be pursued in academia. In Texas, he fostered it by promoting a program whereby the top 10 percent of every high school class was eligible for admission to state universities.

Such programs seem to be working, too, in California and Florida, other states where traditional affirmative action programs have been outlawed.

Such steps belie the Democratic characterization of Bush as hostile to minorities, but Bush needs to do more to ensure that minority individuals can advance — notably, quit cutting back on funding for public education reform and college aid.

Bush also needs to vigorously prosecute civil rights law violations and go out of his way

to cultivate black support the way he has among Hispanics.

One analyst, David Bositis of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, says Bush's Michigan decision is likely to hurt him among Hispanics, who favor affirmative action by a margin of 80 percent to 15 percent in a recent study.

But another Center study last fall suggests the damage will be marginal. The study asked whites, blacks and Hispanics if they agreed with the statement "we should make every possible effort to improve the conditions for blacks and other minorities."

Huge majorities — 63 percent of whites, 74.5 percent of blacks and 80 percent of Hispanics — said they agreed with the general idea of aiding minorities. But support fell off precipitously when the Center added the words "even if it means giving them preferred treatment."

Only 29 percent of whites agreed, 57.2 percent of blacks and just 48.2 percent of Hispanics.

There's little question that disadvantaged minorities need government help to overcome discrimination and achieve the American dream. Bush and Republicans ought to do more to help them, but Democrats ought to quit playing racial politics.

Morton Kondracke is executive editor of Roll Call, the newspaper of Capitol Hill.

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