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What Will History Say?

Move Over, Hoover

By Douglas Brinkley
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Shortly after Thanksgiving I had dinner in California with Ronald Reagan's best biographer, Lou Cannon. Like many historians these days, we discussed whether George W. Bush is, conceivably, the worst U.S. president ever. Cannon bristled at the idea.

Bush has two more years to leave his mark, he argued. What if there is a news flash that U.S. Special Forces have killed Osama bin Laden or that North Korea has renounced its nuclear program? What if a decade from now Iraq is a democracy and a statue of Bush is erected on Firdaus Square where that famously toppled one of Saddam Hussein once stood?

There is wisdom in Cannon's prudence. Clearly it's dangerous for historians to wield the "worst president" label like a scalp-hungry tomahawk simply because they object to Bush's record. But we live in speedy times and, the truth is, after six years in power and barring a couple of miracles, it's safe to bet that Bush will be forever handcuffed to the bottom rungs of the presidential ladder. The reason: Iraq.

Some presidents, such as Bill Clinton and John F. Kennedy, are political sailors -- they tack with the wind, reaching difficult policy objectives through bipartisan maneuvering and pulse-taking. Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, was deemed a "chameleon on plaid," changing colors regularly to control the zeitgeist of the moment. Other presidents are submariners, refusing to zigzag in rough waters, preferring to go from Point A to Point B with directional certitude. Harry S. Truman and Reagan are exemplars of this modus operandi, and they are the two presidents Bush has tried to emulate.

The problem for Bush is that certitude is only a virtue if the policy enacted is proven correct. Most Americans applaud Truman's dropping of bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki because they achieved the desired effect: Japan surrendered. Reagan's

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anti-communist zeal -- including increased defense budgets and Star Wars -- is only now perceived as positive because the Soviet Union started to unravel on his watch.

Nobody has accused Bush of flinching. After 9/11, he decided to circumvent the United Nations and declare war on Iraq. The principal pretext was that Baghdad supposedly was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction. From the get-go, the Iraq war was a matter of choice. Call it Mr. Bush's War. Like a high-stakes poker player pushing in all his chips on one hand, he bet the credibility of the United States on the notion that Sunnis and Shiites wanted democracy, just like the Poles and the Czechs during the Cold War.

Bush wasn't operating in a historical bubble. Other presidents had gambled on wars of choice and won. James K. Polk, for example, begged Gen. Zachary Taylor to start a border war with Mexico along the Rio Grande. An ardent expansionist, he wanted to annex land in what are now Arizona, California and New Mexico. Nearly half of the American population in 1846 screamed foul, including Henry David Thoreau, who refused to pay taxes for an unjust war. Yet in short order, Polk achieved his land-grab objective with a string of stunning military successes. Mr. Polk's War was a success, even if the pretext was immoral. On virtually every presidential rating poll, Polk is deemed a "near great" president.

Half a century later, William McKinley also launched a war of choice based on the bogus notion that the USS Maine, anchored in Cuba, had been sabotaged by Spain. The Maine, in truth, was crippled by a boiler explosion. An imperialist, McKinley used the Maine as a pretext to fight Spain in the Caribbean and in the Philippines. A group of anti-imperialists led by Mark Twain and William James, among others, vehemently objected, rightfully accusing McKinley of warmongering. But McKinley had the last word in what his secretary of state, John Hay, deemed "a splendid little war." In just six months, McKinley had achieved his objectives. History chalks up Mr. McKinley's War as a U.S. win, and he also polls favorably as a "near great" president.

Mr. Bush's War, by contrast, has not gone well. When you don't achieve a stealth-like victory in a war of choice, then you're seen as being stuck in a quagmire. Already the United States has fought longer in the Iraq war than in World War II. As the death toll continues to rise, more and more Americans are objecting. The pending Democratic takeover of Congress is only one manifestation of the spiraling disapproval of Bush.

At first, you'd want to compare Bush's Iraq predicament to that of Lyndon B. Johnson during the Vietnam War. But LBJ had major domestic accomplishments to boast about when leaving the White House, such as the Civil Rights Act and Medicare/Medicaid. Bush has virtually none. Look at how he dealt with the biggest post-9/11 domestic crisis of his tenure. He didn't rush to help the Gulf region after Hurricane Katrina because the country was overextended in Iraq and had a massive budget deficit. Texas conservatives always say that LBJ's biggest mistake was thinking that he could fund both the Great Society and Vietnam. They believe he had to choose one or the other. They call Johnson fiscally irresponsible. Bush learned this lesson: He chose Iraq over New Orleans.

So Bush's legacy hinges on Iraq, which is an unmitigated disaster. Instead of being forgiven, like Polk and McKinley, for his phony pretext for war (WMD and al-Qaeda operatives in Baghdad), he stands to be lambasted by future scholars. What once were his two best sound bites -- "Wanted dead or alive" and "Mission accomplished" -- will be used like billy clubs to shatter his legacy every time it gets a revisionist lift. The left will keep battering him for warmongering while the right will remember its outrage that he didn't send enough battalions to Iraq.

There isn't much that Bush can do now to salvage his reputation. His presidential library will someday be built around two accomplishments: that after 9/11, the U.S. homeland wasn't again attacked by terrorists (knock on wood) and that he won two presidential elections, allowing him to appoint conservatives to key judicial posts. I also believe that he is an honest man and that his administration has been largely void of

widespread corruption. This will help him from being portrayed as a true villain.

This last point is crucial. Though Bush may be viewed as a laughingstock, he won't have the zero-integrity factors that have kept Nixon and Harding at the bottom in the presidential sweepstakes. Oddly, the president whom Bush most reminds me of is Herbert Hoover, whose name is synonymous with failure to respond to the Great Depression. When the stock market collapsed, Hoover, for ideological reasons, did too little. When 9/11 happened, Bush did too much, attacking the wrong country at the wrong time for the wrong reasons. He has joined Hoover as a case study on how not to be president.

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