

Will the public's disdain endure?

Current views may soften, but scholars skeptical that history will redeem him

By RICHARD S. DUNHAM

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President George W. Bush rallied the nation after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks with this appearance at Ground Zero with New York firefighter Bob Beckwith.

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WASHINGTON — George W. Bush leaves office on Jan. 20 as one of the most vilified presidents in American history.

Battered by an unpopular war and an economic collapse, Bush has racked up the longest streak of negative job-approval ratings in the history of polling. His end-of-term scores are worse than any modern president except Richard Nixon, who resigned in disgrace.

More than nine in 10 history professors grade Bush as either the worst president in U.S. history or one of the worst. And when the Pew Research Center recently asked Americans to sum up the Bush presidency in a word, the leading choice was "incompetent."

"We have, by any polling measure, the most unpopular president in American polling history," said Republican pollster Bill McInturff.

Amid the avalanche of dismal poll numbers and academics' near-universal disdain, the 43rd president is understandably defensive.

In an interview on Friday, Bush expressed regrets at his administration's mistakes, from botching the immigration debate to incendiary rhetoric in the run-up to war with Iraq. Still, he steadfastly believes that he will be vindicated, like two widely reviled politicians of their day, Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman.

"History will be the judge," the president said in an interview on Friday. "History will look back and determine."

The former Texas governor is not holding his breath, though. When history writes the final chapter on his presidency, Bush once told author Bob Woodward, "we're all dead."

Historic indicators

At this point, scholars and pundits are having their say — little of it favorable. But Steven Schier, a political scientist at Carleton College, says that Bush's ultimate legacy "depends heavily on subsequent events."

"The future course of the economy and of national security will determine whether Bush was prescient or wrongheaded," Schier said.

Still, there are ways to predict which way the historical winds may blow without waiting for decades. By examining a series of performance measures, it is possible to get a peek at Bush's probable place in the pantheon of presidents.

Those measures include a diverse group of statistics, such as national economic growth, inflation, unemployment, accumulation of federal debt, job creation and stock market performance.

Modern presidents who consistently rank near the top by most of these measures — Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton — generally are considered above-average leaders. On the flip side, the three White House veterans who rank near the bottom of the list on these measures — Herbert Hoover, Gerald Ford and Richard Nixon — are widely viewed as below-average presidents.

Judged by this basket of statistics, George W. Bush fares a bit better than the harsh judgment of his contemporaries, landing in the middle of the pack by most measures and near the back of the group in others.

In the categories of inflation and unemployment, Bush is tied for fifth among the 12 most recent presidents, ahead of Ronald Reagan and Roosevelt.

And he ranks sixth best in the "misery index," a combination of unemployment and inflation that Jimmy Carter used successfully to skewer incumbent Republican Ford in 1976. (Ironically, Carter chalked up the highest "misery index" of any president since Hoover.)

Mixed rankings

Bush does worse in several other categories.

The mediocre 2.2 percent annual increase in the nation's Gross Domestic Product places him ninth among the 13 presidents of the last 80 years.

He has presided over the third-largest percentage increase in the national debt, behind only Roosevelt (who fought World War II) and Reagan (who spent the Soviet Union into bankruptcy).

Only George H.W. Bush and Ford saw fewer jobs created during their terms.

And George W. Bush is one of only two presidents since the Great Depression to preside over a decline in the Dow Jones industrial average.

While this mixed record is unlikely to get Bush chiseled into the stone of Mount Rushmore, it's enough to give his supporters ammunition for the legacy battle ahead.

"Through history, wartime presidents are initially looked upon unfavorably," says Valerie Duty Citrano, a Republican activist from Waco. "But as time passes and more details are revealed, those ideas change. In the future, I believe President Bush will be thought of as one of our best presidents."

Most politicians and academics are far more skeptical.

"This guy has turned out to be the most damaging and reckless president in our history," said Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., who worked closely with Bush on education reform before breaking with him.

'Point of no return'

Texas A&M University political scientist George Edwards says Bush is likely to get good marks for fighting AIDS in Africa and extending prescription health benefits to Medicare recipients.

But he thinks foreign-policy missteps and management failures will doom the 43rd president to below-average status.

"There's nothing that the historical perspective can do which will make the incompetent handling of the future of Iraq and Hurricane Katrina look better," Edwards said.

"Katrina is more of a defining moment in American history and the Bush presidency than 9/11," said independent pollster John Zogby. "For the Bush administration, that was the point of no return."

Bruce Buchanan, a presidential scholar at the University of Texas, said most scholars don't give Bush credit for the relatively low inflation and unemployment of the first seven years of his presidency.

"Most political scientists and economists tend to discount those numbers a little bit because they are driven by the business cycle," he said.

Democratic pollster Peter Hart says that Bush faces years in the political wilderness.

"I don't think time is going to change this (image)," Hart said.

"He is more like a Herbert Hoover that Democrats will run against again and again. He is responsible for the condition the country is in. For that, voters have reached a firm, fixed point of view."

Whatever Bush's economic legacy, some analysts think he could still be redeemed on the foreign policy front.

"There is a chance that with the passage of time, President Bush's vision may be vindicated," said Jim Granato, director of the University of Houston's Center for Public Policy.

"The terrible costs are immediate, but the benefits are not — and they may never be realized. "Yet the possibility exists that he did assess the (terrorist) threat correctly and set in motion a series of changes that made future generations better off."

richard.dunham@chron.com