

TIE asked a top Democratic analyst why the animosity toward the 43rd President is so great.

The Bush Hate Game

BY CHARLES E. COOK, JR.

It really is a remarkable phenomenon that we are now seeing in the United States the same degree of hatred among Democrats and liberals toward President Bush that we saw among Republicans and conservatives toward President Clinton during his presidency. In fact, one year before facing reelection, President Bush actually had a lower Gallup Poll job approval rating among Democrats than President Clinton had among Republicans at the same point in his presidency. Think about all of this in a historical context. As a long-time Washington observer, I am quite sure I never met anyone who personally hated President George H.W. Bush. I knew some Democrats who hated many of President Reagan's policies, but I'm not sure I met any who truly hated President Reagan. I knew quite a few Republicans who thought that President Carter was weak and indecisive, but not any who truly hated President Carter. I know I never met anyone who hated President Ford. You really have to go back to Democrats loathing President Nixon and Republicans hating President Franklin Roosevelt to find widespread numbers of people in one political party despising a president from the other party, and now we have seen that in back-to-back presidencies.

While some would argue that this phenomenon is a part of our times, a new "in-your-face" mentality, most certainly it is an outgrowth of the advent of overheated radio talk show rhetoric, the endless number of televised "food fights" on cable networks, and highly partisan and ideological Web sites, where partisans and ideologues can get their venom injections without dilution by facts and fairness, with no contradictory views allowed. Inconvenient facts and extenuating circumstances that get in the way are simply not heard.

For the current President Bush, some of the antipathy toward him no doubt goes back to the contested 2000 election results in Florida, with some Democrats

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still convinced that the election was stolen. Other Bush detractors point to stylistic differences, while his Texas “swagger” and cowboy-like bravado and language set off still others. The war with Iraq and Bush’s low regard for multi-lateral organizations irritate still more.

As a practical matter, the near-unanimity of approval that President Bush receives among Republicans and conservatives effectively constructs for him a very high floor, a

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base of support that it is difficult to fall below. At the same time, the extraordinary degree of opposition to Bush among Democrats and liberals creates a ceiling above which it is very hard for him to break through for any sustained period of time. If Bush were a stock, one could say he had a very narrow trading range.

A high floor and a low ceiling, together with this country’s nearly equal division between parties and a high degree of polarization, virtually ensures a competitive presidential election. Yet progress in the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan and the durability of the economic recovery will determine whether the competitive race will go to the next level of being truly close.

It is almost a cliché that a sitting President’s re-election is a referendum on the President more than a choice between two or more candidates. The operative questions are whether voters see a President as having performed well enough to deserve re-election and whether voters have sufficient confidence in a President to lead the country for another four

years. There are three possible answers: yes, no, and maybe. If the answer to both questions is yes, then the identity, strengths, and weaknesses of any opponent are irrelevant. If the answer to both questions is no, within reason, then just about any opponent sufficiently strong to win a major party’s nomination would be strong enough to win. Only when the answer is maybe—that gray, debatable area—do the opponent and the campaign become truly important.

In most elections, dozens of factors and issues come into play to help voters make those key determinations about a President. But when the condition of the economy is bad or particularly fragile, or if we are at war with American troops in harm’s way, then smaller issues have a way of becoming less relevant than they would be when the economy is strong and the country is at peace.

The two best clues to whether President Bush will be re-elected will be the state of the economy in the second quarter of 2004 and the state of affairs in Iraq and Afghanistan going into in the three months leading into the election. History tells us that the second quarter is a better predictor of how a President or a President’s party will do than the third quarter because there is a lag time between economic conditions and public opinion. An economy can be turning down or up in the third quarter and its progress not be fully recognized, while the level and direction of the economy in the second quarter is far more apparent on election day. The improving economy during the three months preceding the first President Bush’s ill-fated 1992 re-election attempt as well as the economic downturn in the few months preceding the 2000 election are prime examples of third-quarter changes not being recognized by November voters.

Beyond GDP growth, the unemployment rate, the level of employment (particularly compared to the time of President Bush’s January 2001 assumption of office), and the change in real disposable income are all statistics worth watching at the end of that second quarter, as well as the public perception of the economy and its prospects. Democrats will, no doubt, be talking about the fact that no president since Herbert Hoover has suffered a net loss of jobs: at

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year's end, the net loss in jobs was in excess of two million. While there is little chance that this job deficit will be eradicated by the time of the November election, how much of that job deficit has been diminished as months go by will be important.

An August study by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York suggests that the level of structural job losses during this most recent downturn and recovery could make job creation more difficult. The study showed that during the twin downturns of the mid-1970s, 49 percent of job losses were cyclical, temporary job losses that would bounce back when the business cycle turned upwards, while 51 percent of the job losses were structural, permanent job losses, jobs that either no longer exist or won't exist in this country. During the downturn of the early 1980s, the percentages were exactly the same, 49 percent cyclical, 51 percent structural. The downturn of the early 1990s was somewhat different, with just 43 percent of the job losses cyclical, while 57 percent were structural. But this current downturn is very, very different, with just 21 percent of the job losses deemed cyclical, 79 percent structural. Given the fact that creating a brand-new job almost always takes longer than simply calling back another shift at the plant or rehiring laid-off sales people, some argue that job creation during this recovery will be exceedingly stubborn.

While the loss of manufacturing jobs to lower-wage nations is hardly new, the issue of offshore outsourcing of jobs

common law-trained, English-speaking lawyers in India. or Indian physicians approving or declining health insurance claims submitted by Americans to their insurance carriers, or

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highly skilled computer programming jobs going to China or India, this is no longer the case of low-skilled American workers laid off at the pencil manufacturing plant.

If protectionism were the answer, this would be easy. It is never hard to create trade barriers. But to the extent that one believes that protectionism is not the answer, then this growing problem becomes much more complicated. Against this backdrop, Americans will be looking at this economy, its underlying strengths and weaknesses.

Then there is Iraq and Afghanistan. While few if any Americans objected to the United States invading Afghanistan and going after al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, both intelligence and journalistic reports suggests the situation may get worse in those troubled nations before it gets better. If things get worse, the controversy in Afghanistan will be over whether the Bush Administration committed sufficient troops and resources early enough and kept them in place until the job was done. In Iraq, some will argue that the United States should never have invaded, that the lack of a direct connection to September 11, the overstated threat of weapons of mass destruction, and the unwillingness to wait for greater multinational assistance were all mistakes. Others who supported the attack will question whether it was done right, and whether warnings by top military officials that the commitment of troops and resources was insufficient should have been heeded.

At year's end, there's no question that President Bush was enjoying an encouraging run of events: a well-received Thanksgiving Day trip to meet the troops in Iraq, the capture of Saddam Hussein, and the conclusion of a nuclear disarmament agreement with Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi, all against the backdrop of an economy that seemed to be genuinely improving. But history tells us that ten months is a long time and much can happen.

The bottom line is that while the country is indeed evenly divided between the parties and highly polarized in their views of President Bush, it is the age-old forces of the state of the economy and national security that will determine the outcome of this election. ◆

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is attracting concern. Increasingly white collar, knowledge-based jobs are leaving the country, some to China but more to India. Whether it is legal contracts being drawn up by