

Wings clipped for lame duck

W should gird for probes, loss of power

ANALYSIS

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WASHINGTON — As a practical matter, it's all downhill from here for a significantly diminished President.

Yesterday's elections were a setback for a President whose job approval and personal popularity were already scraping the political bottom.

"There's no way getting around it," one of President Bush's closest political confidants told the Daily News. "He has been very seriously weakened. I hope they realize it."

Although salvaging the Senate would ease the pain somewhat, Bush is now a certified lame duck, whose power ebbs with each tick of the political calendar.

That doesn't mean he's a dead duck.

Only a President can conduct foreign policy, so Bush will be busy his final two years wrestling with Iraq, Iran, North Korea and other geopolitical trouble spots.

He can also create policy through executive orders and control the agenda to some extent through his bully-pulpit powers. And he can still thwart the Democrats by wielding his veto pen.

Ironically, he's also far more likely to get an immigration bill with his guest worker plan through the next Congress with Democrats running the House.

"I've got a lot to do," Bush told Fox News last week, "and a President can get a lot done in his last two years."

That bravura is certain to be stymied, however, by a Democratic House that will launch investigations into many of his more controversial policies, especially the Iraq war.

"He's going to have virtually no clout," a senior Democratic Party operative predicted.

A Republican loyalist with close ties to the White House was equally pessimistic. "You're going to have a great gridlock and nothing much gets done," he said.

White House officials said Bush will urge Democrats to join hands with him in a biparti-

san spirit for the common welfare. That good-government strategy is unlikely to resonate with anyone except his truest believers.

In 2000 Bush campaigned as a uniter, not a divider, but polls show most Americans believe he's governed in precisely the opposite fashion. So when he asks the Democrats for help, he won't have much credibility.

Moreover, Presidents must be feared on Capitol Hill, not loved. Yet this year Republicans unhappy with the war and immigration policy discovered they could defy their President on an important vote and live to tell their grandchildren about it. That speaks volumes about Bush's weakened standing, even with his own.

Next year, even his most loyal allies will be worrying more about getting reelected in 2008 than worrying about Bush.

Barring some cataclysmic turn of events like another 9/11, the twilight of Bush's presidency is shaping up as a melancholy time for him and a treading-water interim while waiting for 2008. tdefrank@nydailynews.com

President Bush gets set to vote at his polling site in Crawford, Tex.

