



# NOT LIKE HIS FATHER

Bush I and II each launched a war with Iraq. That's where the similarities end

By Kenneth T. Walsh

**O**n New Year's Day, President George W. Bush was visiting wounded soldiers at San Antonio's Brooke Army Medical Center. He found himself by the bed of a badly burned soldier, swathed in bandages. He was told she might not pull through. Surrounded by her family, he couldn't summon words to express his feelings. "I sat there and wept with them," he recalled later. "I didn't know what else to do."

Fifteen years ago, President George H. W. Bush experienced his own emotional moments with the troops. On a Thanksgiving visit to Saudi Arabia amid a huge U.S. buildup in the Persian Gulf region, he grew flustered when a young lieutenant thanked him for being there. Tearing up, the president was momentarily speechless, then blurted out, "That's what Woody Allen said: 'Ninety percent of life is showing up.'"

It is a familiar scene for the father and son: those awkward meetings with soldiers in wartime, punctuated by the fact that neither is a man of natural eloquence.

The two Bush men are bound together in other ways. They are only the second father and son to become president (John Adams and John Quincy Adams were the first). And each launched a war against the same tyrant in the same country.

Yet curiously, there are more differences than similarities in their role as commander in chief. The 41st president was a coalition builder and a diplomat. The 43rd president was willing to go it alone and ignore international opprobrium. The first Bush had a sense of limits about American power. His son believes the military is his best tool for working his will abroad.

The two men made the case for war in different fashion as well. It is true the father's job was easier than his son's. Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait and was an unmistakable threat. Nonetheless, George Herbert Walker Bush tried to build consensus at home and abroad before starting the Gulf War.

George W. Bush made his case in a more controversial way, arguing for a pre-emptive strike to depose Saddam. He spoke of how the Iraqi dictator might use weapons of mass destruction and of his ties to terrorists. Those claims have never been proved.

It is striking that the son rarely cites his father as his role model



THE HUMAN COST OF WAR HAS NOT DETERRED BUSH.

## IRAQ WAR

**Why it began:** Fear of weapons of mass destruction, fear of a larger threat  
**Presidential rhetoric:** "Peaceful efforts to disarm the Iraqi regime have failed again and again."

**Start date:** March 20, 2003

**Victory declared:** May 1, 2003

**U.S. troops sent:** 160,000 at height (November 2005); now 140,000

**Cost until now:** \$173 billion

**U.S. death toll (as of 1/19/06):** 2,225

as commander in chief. George W. Bush says the world has changed dramatically since his father's tenure, largely because of 9/11 and the threat posed by terrorists. The challenges he faces, he says, are unique. As Vice President Dick Cheney told *U.S. News* in January, "We're talking about the possibility of a handful of terrorists—a relatively few individuals—able to get their hands on, say, a biological agent or a nuclear weapon and do enormous harm inside the United States. That's sort of the ultimate threat we face today. And it's a different kind of threat than we've ever faced before . . . It forces us to think in new ways about how we defend the nation."

**Grounded.** This gospel of singularity informs Bush's role as commander in chief. It has led him to expand the authority and reach the presidency into areas his father never entered: domestic spying without warrants; detaining suspected terrorists without trial; conducting a vast, pre-emptive war against terrorists. "It requires certain qualities," says a senior White House official, "such as an unshakable will—and, particularly during a time of war—passion. Feelings are going to run higher than normal, and you have to be grounded, in the sense of knowing what you're doing and believing what you're doing is right."

Bush has said the terrorist attacks of 9/11 gave him his mission as president—to protect the nation from what he sees as a glob-

al network of "evildoers." The day after 9/11, he called advisers to the White House residence and urged them to prepare for a long struggle. Communicating the facts about the war would be difficult, the president said, partly because it might be impossible to reveal successes, lest such announcements expose U.S. counterterrorism methods and endanger American operatives. One of the biggest challenges, he cautioned, would be to stay the course. "The further we get from this day," he warned, "people are

going to forget." He promised never to do that.

Bush believes he must keep up his campaign to convince the nation that the war is going well. "People see so much of the war on cable TV that the president needs to provide context," says a senior administration official. That means countering news of casualties and war costs by emphasizing that America cannot abandon its new client state.

Bush's father, by contrast, saw the 1991 war with Iraq as a conventional conflict to be won by conventional means. And he had a strong sense of limits. George Herbert Walker Bush called off the ground battle after only 100 hours because Saddam's forces had been crushed. His refusal to take over Iraq and occupy Baghdad was widely criticized, but Bush argued that the United Nations never approved an occupation. He also insisted that occupying Iraq would have been vastly expensive in lives



IRAQIS SURRENDER DURING OPERATION DESERT STORM

## PERSIAN GULF WAR

**Why it began:** Iraq invaded Kuwait on Aug. 2, 1990.  
**Presidential rhetoric:** "We will have taught a dangerous tyrant . . . that there is no place for lawless aggression."  
**Start date:** Jan. 17, 1991  
**Cease-fire:** Feb. 28, 1991  
**U.S. troops deployed:** 697,000  
**Cost:** \$61 billion (\$53 billion pledged by allies)  
**U.S. death toll:** 148 on the battlefield, 145 nonbattlefield

and money. His predictions have proved true—on his son's watch.

George H. W. Bush felt another constraint—what historians call "Vietnam syndrome," a reluctance by Americans to commit troops to potentially lengthy wars without a guarantee of success and a certainty of moral justification. "After the mess in Vietnam, many Americans didn't trust their leaders to send troops anywhere," says a former adviser. "So we developed a vast public outreach program." At one point, Bush even gave a speech justifying the coming conflict in theological terms, using the philosophies of Aquinas and Augustine to define what was a "just war."

**Self-reliant.** The senior Bush felt equipped—from his experience as vice president, former director of central intelligence, and U.S. envoy to the United Nations and to China—to challenge both the military and his advisers. George W. Bush seems more accepting of the advice of his in-house "experts." He went along with recommendations of Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to minimize the number of troops needed in Iraq, which some military analysts and many Democrats have branded a mistake. Bush also accepted his advisers' claims that the occupation would be relatively easy and that the Iraqis would welcome U.S. soldiers as liberators. "We built a policy based on practicalities," says a former national security adviser to the father. "They built a policy based on assumptions."

In running the war, the elder Bush didn't micromanage the

Pentagon, but he did pay close attention to certain tactics. He reviewed plans for bombing areas where civilian casualties were likely, for instance, and tried to select targets and ways of attack to minimize harm to noncombatants. If his son pays heed to such details, he has not disclosed it. In fact, he says he almost always leaves operational details to the military.

The father, a former Navy pilot shot down over the Pacific in World War II, knew all too well the perils of war. Perhaps that's why he seemed more

troubled by the consequences than his son. On Dec. 31, 1990, as war approached, the elder Bush wrote a moving letter to his five children about how much he enjoyed their time at Camp David over Christmas. "I guess what I want you to know as a father is this: Every human life is precious," he wrote. "When the question is asked, 'How many lives are you willing to sacrifice?'—it tears at my heart. The answer, of course, is none—none at all." But Bush added: "I look at today's crisis as 'good' vs. 'evil'—Yes, it is that clear. . . . Sometimes in life you have to act as you think best—you can't compromise, you can't give in—even if your critics are loud and numerous."

And what does the father think of the son's choices? He isn't privy to the high-level intelligence his son receives, so he defers to the judgment of his first-born. Besides, one of the traits the father shares with his son is loyalty, so he will let history judge both men by their deeds and their times. ●