

export—so that we borrow some \$2 billion a day from nations like China—we have built new twin towers: budget debt and trade debt. Economists keep warning us they are unsustainable, and our political leaders keep whistling past the graveyard.

Energy and the environment. From Richard Nixon on, presidents have called for energy independence. Congress has passed one bill after another, but the nation's dependence on foreign oil has actually grown since 30 years ago—from around 30 percent to over 60 percent! And with the price of oil around \$70 a barrel, as columnist Tom Friedman points out, not only are consumers paying more at the pump, but we're financing authoritarian regimes in Russia, Iran, and Venezuela.

Then there's climate change. The question is no longer whether mankind is heating up the atmosphere but whether and when there might come a tipping point when warming is no longer reversible. Some scientists think we have already passed it; others disagree. But no one disagrees that the United States is a primary culprit, accounting for 24 percent of carbon dioxide emissions with less than 5 percent of the world's population. The time has clearly come for a "grand bargain" in American politics in which the right agrees to major conservation steps, the left agrees to more production and to nuclear power, and both agree on a dramatic investment in renewable energy. But Washington today is so caught up with gaining a tiny partisan advantage that no one even talks boldly.

Staying ahead. Last fall, the National Academies, experts on science, engineering, and medicine, issued a report aptly titled, "Rising Above the Gathering Storm." It warned that unless the United States moves fast, China, India, and others will rapidly catch up with us competitively. America maintains commanding leads in many fields, but signs of slippage are abundant. In the sale of high technology, we've gone from a \$54 billion surplus in 1990 to a \$50 billion deficit today. Last year, American investors put more money in foreign stock funds than in domestic.

Part of the reason our rivals are catching up is their lower costs. A high-tech company in the United States, says the national commission, can now find and employ eight young engineers in India for the cost of just one in America. But another reason is that China and India are aggressively preparing for the future through education. Within five years, observers believe, 90 percent of all of the world's scientists and engineers will live in Asia.

We are already feeling the front edges of the economic storm putting downward pressure on incomes here. In one recent period, low-wage employers in companies like Wal-Mart (the nation's largest corporate employer) and McDonald's produced 44 percent of the country's new jobs, while high-wage employers generated just 29 percent. Unless we turn things around, we will soon see a steep downward slide in our standard of living.

All these storms are tied together. Mediocre schools mean we become less competitive. High medical costs make it impossible to bring our deficits down. A lack of energy independence makes us even more hostage to others. Losing our competitive edge lowers our incomes and makes it harder to pay for better schools and information systems that could help reduce healthcare costs. Each gathers force year by year.

In writing his books on World War II, Winston Churchill entitled the first *The Gathering Storm*. It was obvious in the 1930s, he said, that threats were rapidly building in Nazi Germany; yet the political leaders in Britain and France looked away, drifting into the future. One day, it was too late. Will history now repeat itself in America? ●

# What History Has to Say

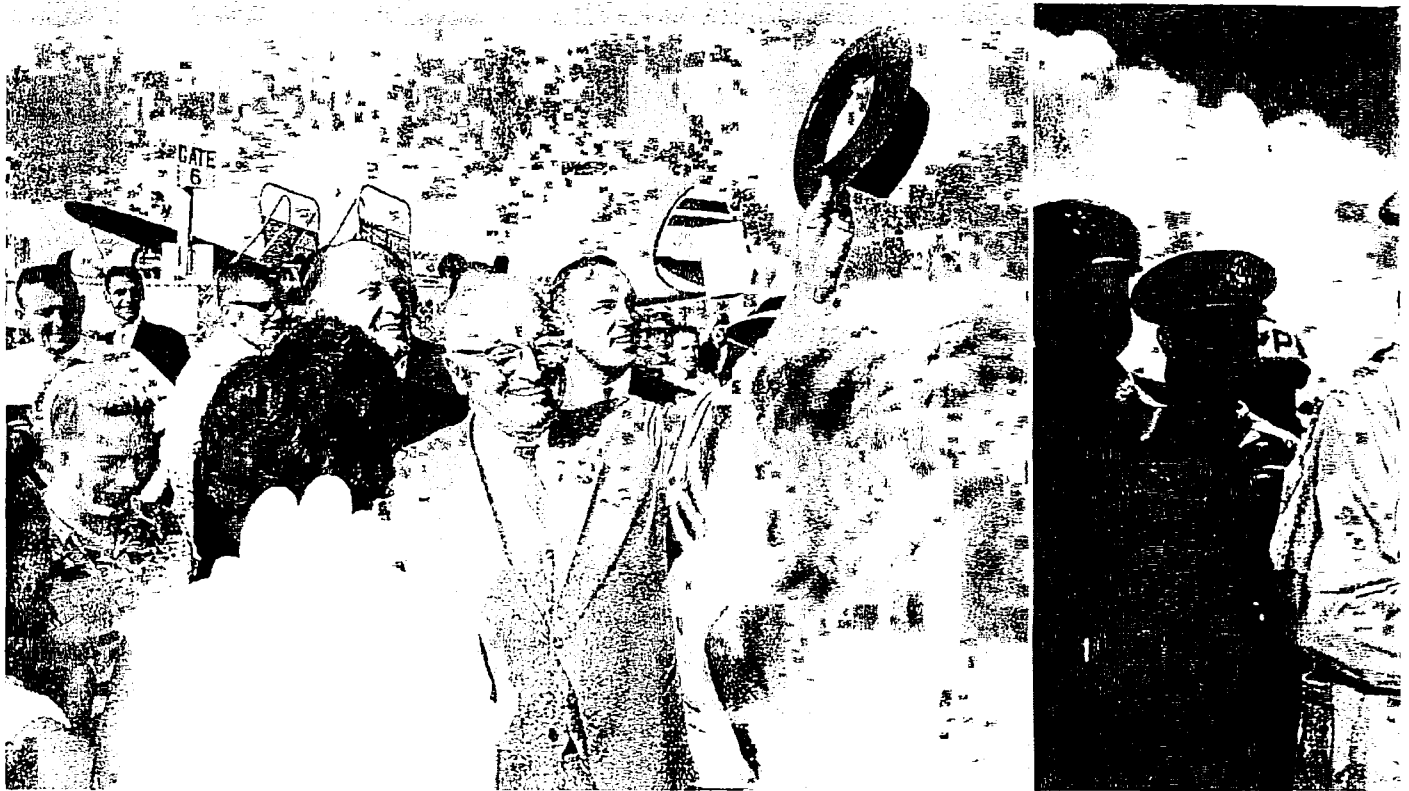
By Kenneth T. Walsh

George W. Bush doesn't consider himself a "navel gazer," but lately he has been unusually contemplative. As he ponders his abysmal job-approval ratings and weakened presidency, Bush tells aides he is struck by the number of books being published about America's first president, ranging from David McCullough's bestselling *1776* to Joseph J. Ellis's *His Excellency: George Washington*. Two centuries from now, Bush has concluded, historians will still be assessing his own administration, and this has strengthened his resolve to take the "long view," ignore today's growing army of naysayers and second-guessers, and do what feels right. "The president is going to govern like it's his first day, not his last day, and really swing for the fences in terms of bold reform."



As the months dragged on, the economic situation increased.





only to see their popularity and effectiveness wane. Only one, Reagan, managed to recover before he left office.

### WOODROW WILSON

FEW AMERICAN PRESIDENTS have pushed so hard for utopian goals as Woodrow Wilson. This was his downfall.

When conflict erupted in Europe in August 1914, Wilson saw a role for the United States as the leader of a new order. On April 2, 1917, he asked Congress to declare war on Germany and its allies, announcing, "We shall fight for the things we have always carried nearest our hearts. . . . The world must be made safe for democracy."

On Jan. 8, 1918, Wilson announced the 14 Points, his definition of America's war aims. These included national self-determination and the establishment of a League of Nations to mediate international disputes. But the flaw in Wilson's system was that it provided for no enforcement power. Wilson idealistically believed that the nations of the world would simply unite against aggression, according to political scientist James Chace. And from an American perspective, Wilson seemed to plunge the United States too deeply into European entanglements.

**League failure.** When Wilson returned to America from negotiations in France in July 1919, he immediately embarked on a crusade to sell the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations to a skeptical public and a resistant Senate. Some legislators wanted to make sure that America would not be required under the treaty to preserve the territory or independence of any country unless Congress specifically approved. Wilson refused to compromise on this and other provisions, and the treaty stalled. At that point, Wilson tried to rally public opinion for his

plan. He traveled 10,000 miles to make his case but ruined his health and suffered a stroke that paralyzed his left side in September 1919. For weeks, he was bedridden in Washington and saw almost no one except his second wife, Edith. As the months dragged on, inflation increased markedly, strikes became prevalent, unrest led to bloody bombings, big business attempted to destroy labor unions, and many politicians began a hunt for "subversives" around the country.

Wilson refused to resign despite his weakened condition, and his wife assumed a big role in running the government. The Republican-controlled Senate twice rejected the Versailles agreement, in defiance of the Democratic president, and the United States never joined the League of Nations. The defeated Germany felt persecuted by the treaty, fueling resentments that led to World War II.

Robert Dallek and many other historians today say George W. Bush reminds them of Wilson because of his similar commitment to spreading democracy, his frequent unwillingness to compromise, and his evangelical fervor in defining America's mission in the world. French President Georges Clemenceau once said of Wilson, "He thinks he is another Jesus Christ come upon the Earth to reform men." Some critics feel the same about Bush. But White House advisers think he will prove to be much more of a realist than Wilson.

### HARRY TRUMAN

IN JULY 1944, DEMOCRAT Franklin Roosevelt selected a relatively obscure Missouri senator named Harry Truman as his running mate, to replace the divisive Henry Wallace. When FDR died April 12, 1945, only three months after his fourth inau-

"I am here to make decisions, whether they



**LATE BLOOMER.** The brutal Korean War and clashes with General MacArthur pounded Truman's popularity. History has tended to view his legacy more favorably.

guration, Truman became president with some serious handicaps. As vice president, he had been mostly left out of the decision making. Not until he was sworn in as president, for example, was Truman told about the atomic bomb, which was already nearing completion.

But Truman prided himself on making tough choices and placed a memorable sign on his desk: "The buck stops here." In a remark that seems to reflect Bush's philosophy today, Truman once told a visiting diplomat, "I am here to make decisions, and whether they prove right or wrong, I am going to make them." He went on to preside over the end of World War II, partly brought on by his order to use nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August 1945. He met with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin to redraw the world map. He implemented the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe. On July 26, 1948, he signed an executive order to end racial discrimination in the military.

But things turned sour for Truman after he was elected to a full presidential term in 1948. In June 1950, he sent U.S. troops to defend pro-American South Korea from an attack by Communist North Korea. When Chinese forces entered the war on North Korea's side, the situation grew dire. A bloody stalemate left both sides bogged down at about the boundaries of the original North-South demarcation line.

Truman's popularity declined as Americans grew tired of the war and felt their president was powerless to end it honorably. Things grew worse for Truman when he relieved Gen. Douglas MacArthur of command in Korea after the general broke with administration policies limiting the scope of the conflict.



Meanwhile, at home, Truman was accused by the Republicans of being soft on communism, and anti-Communist sentiment was whipped up by Wisconsin Sen. Joseph McCarthy.

Truman, his popularity at historic lows, decided not to run for re-election in 1952, and Republican Dwight Eisenhower won in a landslide. In fact, Truman left office with only 31 percent of Americans approving of his job performance and 56 percent disapproving—about where Bush is today in the polls.

But in the succeeding decades, historians began to revise their thinking about the man from Missouri. His decisiveness and his willingness to stick to his guns have earned him a place as a historically great or near-great president. President Bush's advisers suggest that Bush could turn out like Truman—reviled in his own time but redeemed by history.

## RONALD REAGAN

RONALD REAGAN WAS always underestimated by his critics. They thought a former B-movie actor with rigid conservative views was incapable of leading America at the end of the 20th century. They were wrong.

Reagan survived an assassination attempt in March 1981, only weeks after taking office, and responded with courage and grace. This impressed millions of Americans. He went on to persuade Congress to cut taxes and limit the growth of the federal government, and he restored the country's confidence after years of setbacks at home and abroad. But during his sixth year, Reagan ran into deep trouble because of the disengagement that characterized his approach to governing. On Nov. 25, 1986, the



**RECOVERY.** After scandal hobbled his presidency, Reagan retooled his staff and scored a profound breakthrough with the Soviet Union's Mikhail Gorbachev.

White House admitted that the administration had secretly sold arms to Iran in hopes that supposed moderates there would arrange freedom for American hostages in the Middle East. Further, the profits were used to finance anti-Marxist contra rebels in Nicaragua. This hurt Reagan in two ways: He had promised never to negotiate with terrorists, and the diversion of funds violated the Boland Amendment banning military aid to the contras. His credibility was in tatters.

Reagan said he was ignorant of what his aides were doing to circumvent the law. After a special investigatory board issued a scathing report, Reagan addressed the nation on March 4, 1987, and took responsibility. "What began as a strategic operation to Iran deteriorated in its implementation into trading arms for hostages," he admitted. "This runs counter to my own beliefs, to administration policy, and to the original strategy we had in mind. There are reasons why it happened, but no excuses. It was a mistake." He also said he didn't know about the diversion of funds to the contras.

New team. He fired his abrasive chief of staff, Donald Regan, and reached outside his core of loyalists to replace him with former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker. He also hired his first-term congressional liaison Ken Duberstein as deputy chief of staff and brought in other high-profile Republicans from outside his orbit. This gave him fresh thinking and enabled him to benefit from the independent stature and credibility of the "outsiders," all respected veterans of government. It also showed that Reagan was capable of adjusting to changing circumstances.

Americans gradually tired of the convoluted Iran-contra affair. The economy was booming, after all, and the nation's con-

fidence was returning. Then Reagan seized another big opportunity as new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev consolidated his power in the Kremlin.

Convinced that Gorbachev was a reformer, Reagan met with him five times between 1985

and 1988, and they formed a historic partnership that ended the Cold War. On Dec. 8, 1987, Reagan and Gorbachev signed an agreement that limited intermediate-range nuclear weapons and called for the destruction of hundreds of warheads on both sides, a milestone in superpower relations.

With the economy humming and the Cold War ending, Reagan left office with a job approval rating of 70 percent. He was widely considered the first successful two-term president in a generation and has since been judged a historically important one as well.

PRESIDENT BUSH HAS COMBINED Wilson's evangelical fervor for spreading democracy with Truman's resolve to make tough decisions and bear the opprobrium of critics, and he has emulated Reagan's determination to steer a conservative course with sunny optimism. All these presidents "had significant foreign policy accomplishments in their second terms that were not realized at the time," says Frank Donatelli, who was Reagan's second-term political director. Bush believes he and his deeds will eventually be placed in that category.

What is unclear is whether Bush can be flexible enough to change when he has to and whether there will be any more historic moments for him to seize, as Reagan did. These could be the key factors determining whether Bush's presidency rebounds over the next 2½ years and, more broadly, whether he is judged a success in the history books. ●

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