

After a series of setbacks, Bush tries a more thoughtful approach

By Kenneth T. Walsh

Maybe it was the influence of his wife, Laura, a former librarian, or his mother, Barbara, a long-time promoter of literacy. Or perhaps he was just eager to dispel his image as an intellectual lightweight. But President Bush now wants it known that he is a man of letters. In fact, Bush has entered a book-reading competition with Karl Rove, his political adviser. White House aides say the president has read 60 books so far this year (while the brainy Rove, to Bush's competitive delight, has racked up only 50). The commander in chief delved into three volumes in August alone—two on Abraham Lincoln and, more surprising for a man of unambiguous convictions, *The Stranger*, Albert Camus's existential tale of murder and alienation (story, Page 38).

Bush's critics aren't buying. A man who so regularly mangles the English language and seems to disdain complexity couldn't possibly be so cerebral, they argue. But portraying Bush as a voracious reader is part of an ongoing White House campaign to restore what a senior adviser calls "gravitas" to the Bush persona. He certainly needs something. Only about 34 percent of Americans approve of his job performance—and 58 percent say Bush

"seems in over his head," according to Democratic pollster Stan Greenberg. If nothing changes, the president could be a major liability for Republicans in November's congressional elections.

Changing these perceptions won't be easy. "A president's image is pretty much set after a few years in office, and it will be very difficult [for Bush] to quickly reverse that image with the public," says political historian Julian Zelizer of Boston University. "It's a cynical age and a cynical country, and it's a savvy public."



A HUMBLER

But the White House is giving it a try. Last week provided a glimpse of Bush's new "gravitas campaign"—and illustrated why his presidency has been humbled—if not in spirit, then in Bush's grudging acknowledgment of his current limitations. The latest blow came when a federal judge in Detroit declared Bush's warrantless eavesdropping program unconstitutional (box, Page 38). More broadly, Bush has been forced to come to terms with reluctant allies abroad, continuing bad news from Iraq and Afghanistan, a protracted crisis in

Lebanon, looming showdowns with Iran and North Korea, and, at home, a balky Congress and a disapproving electorate.

Stepping up. So Bush is changing the way he does business. He returned to Washington from an August vacation at his Texas ranch after only 10 days, in contrast to the five weeks he spent in Crawford a year ago. His public pace seemed especially frenetic—featuring high-profile meetings to discuss the Iraq war on Monday, sessions to discuss homeland security Tuesday, a visit to a motorcycle plant in Pennsylvania



SHOWCASE. President Bush visited the National Counterterrorism Center as part of a week of high-profile activities.

President Bush will go right to the heart of the issue. He'll ask you the difficult question, the one question you didn't come up with an answer for."

As an example of the president's behind-the-scenes engagement, White House aides cite Bush's role in protecting a massive system of reefs in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands from overfishing and pollution two months ago. Bush, whose interest was initially piqued because he is a recreational fisherman, closely followed the policymaking process in the executive branch until he was satisfied that he knew exactly why and how the vast undersea tract should be protected. He even sat in the White House family theater with his wife and watched a film, *Voyage to Kure*, by Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of famed undersea explorer Jacques Cousteau, showing the natural wonders of the reef. He told aides he wanted to "get it done big" and "get it done right."

But rather than submit the issue to Congress, he asked advisers, including environmental counselor James Connaughton, if he could use his authority under the Antiquities Act to unilaterally protect the area by declaring it a national monument. Told this would be legal and that there was a consensus among interested parties, including state officials, he moved ahead. On June 15, Bush created the 140,000-square-mile Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument by executive proclamation.

That kind of single-minded action comes naturally to Bush. It was the approach he took, to considerable international alarm,

during his first term when he launched the invasion of Iraq and declared that he would stop terrorists by waging preventive wars if he deemed them necessary.

Yet Bush tells friends that while he needs to work harder to lift his popularity and change his what-me-worry image, he won't swerve from his path. "On the international level, the job is pretty clear—working to help democracy in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian area," says White House Press Secretary Tony Snow, and at the same fighting a brutal global terrorist movement. On the

PRESIDENCY

Wednesday, signing a new pension security bill Thursday, and meeting with senior economic advisers at Camp David Friday. Pointedly, Bush didn't hold his meetings in the West Wing but traveled around the Washington area—to the Pentagon, the State Department, a new National Counterterrorism Center in suburban Virginia, and Camp David—all to project a sense of vigor and activism.

Bush also brought in outside specialists on Iraq to get a wider range of views. The private session was calculated to show that the president isn't isolated

from the wider world, that he listens to those who disagree with him, and that he isn't detached from the policy process.

"The president is very engaged in most policy issues," says White House Deputy Chief of Staff Joel Kaplan, the main coordinator of policy development for Bush. "He's an extremely aggressive questioner." Kaplan told *U.S. News*: "We have policy time reserved on the president's calendar basically every day that he is in town If you're on the hook for policy time, you know you'd better have your answers down because

WHAT WE'RE READING

George W. Bush, a bookworm? White House aides say it's so. The president enjoys books about Abraham Lincoln, his political hero, and yarns about baseball. A sampling of the reading list, which totals 60 books so far this year:

Alexander II: The Last Great Tsar by *Edvard Radzinsky*

American Prometheus by *Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin* (a biography of atomic bomb inventor Robert Oppenheimer)

Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero

by *David Maraniss* (about the famous Pittsburgh Pirates right fielder)

Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power by *Richard Carwardine*

Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural by *Ronald C. White Jr.*

Mac: The Unknown Story by *Jung Chang and Jon Hallday*

Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women by *Geraldine Brooks*

Polio: An American Story by



David Oshinsky (discussing how polio affected the United States in the mid-20th century)

The Big Bam: The Life and Times of Babe Ruth by *Leigh Montville*

The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History by *John M. Barry*

Salt: A World History by *Mark Kurlansky*

The Stranger by *Albert Camus*. —K.T.W.

domestic level. Bush wants to push for overhauling the immigration laws this fall and eventually hopes to win congressional approval for making his earlier tax cuts permanent as a way to strengthen the economy.

Republican strategists say Bush also

appears to have settled on an approach to campaigning for Republicans this fall. He will weave together many themes under a "security" umbrella—national security, homeland security, border security, and economic security. Bush will argue that the GOP can better ensure

America's security than the Democrats.

Despite all their problems, including the perception that, as an adviser to a previous GOP president says, "the American people are tuning him out," Bush and his aides don't seem distressed. "This is never a White House that gets down," Snow told *U.S. News*. "It's not a place where people sit around whining and griping." That's because Bush sets an infectious upbeat tone. Snow says. "He's not a legacy guy," the press secretary adds. "It's not, 'I've got to get this bill passed because it's important to my legacy.' He takes a longer view of things. He thinks in terms of the long-term challenges the nation faces."

But as his ongoing gravitas campaign shows, Bush also has come to the practical conclusion that polls do matter and that unless he pulls himself out of the cellar, he might well be facing a hostile Congress controlled by Democrats after the November 7 election. "It's an unsettling time for people," says a GOP strategist who informally advises the White House. Despite the president's commitment to a "longer view," what he does over the next 11 weeks could make or break his presidency. And it's clear that, finally, George W. Bush realizes it. ●

A Win for Spying Opponents

Federal District Judge Anna Diggs Taylor's ruling last week in a case challenging the Bush administration's secret domestic surveillance program seemed unequivocal. "There are no hereditary kings in America and no powers not created by the Constitution," she wrote in the first decision to directly address the program's legality. The National Security Agency's warrantless phone eavesdropping, she said, violates U.S. citizens' privacy and free-speech rights and illegally bypasses review by a special court set up to monitor domestic spying. She ordered it stopped. While it appeared a



Inside the Threat Operations Center at Fort Meade, Md.

stinging rebuke of President Bush's broad assertions of executive authority, the battle over spying is far from over. The administration obtained a stay to keep the NSA operation running pending a September 7 hearing and plans to appeal the decision to the Sixth Circuit or the U.S. Supreme Court. More challenges to the program are wending

their way through the courts. When Congress returns, members will again hash over a proposed GOP bill that would essentially legalize the surveillance program as is.

Reasoning. Both sides were quick to put their own spin on the ruling. Administration officials defended their efforts as legal and "very important for the se-

curity of our country," said Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. Some scholars questioned Taylor's reasoning, but Anthony Romero of the American Civil Liberties Union, the lead plaintiff, hailed her decision as "a nail in the coffin" on Bush's use of executive power.

Taylor's ruling gives fresh ammunition to Democrats opposed to an administration-friendly bill proposed by Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter that would, in effect, stamp "approved" on the NSA program. The handful of court cases challenging the surveillance includes one scheduled for argument September 5 in New York. And 17 cases against phone companies believed to have cooperated with the NSA were recently consolidated and are pending in a San Francisco court. —Liz Halloran