America's next president

The incompetent or the incoherent?

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With a heavy heart, we think American readers should vote for John Kerry on November 2nd

YOU might have thought that, three years after a devastating terrorist attack on American soil, a period which has featured two wars, radical political and economic legislation, and an adjustment to one of the biggest stockmarket crashes in history, the campaign for the presidency would be an especially elevated and notable affair. If so, you would be wrong. This year's battle has been between two deeply flawed men: George Bush, who has been a radical, transforming president but who has never seemed truly up to the job, let alone his own ambitions for it; and John Kerry, who often seems to have made up his mind conclusively about something only once, and that was 30 years ago. But on November 2nd, Americans must make their choice, as must *The Economist*. It is far from an easy call, especially against the backdrop of a turbulent, dangerous world. But, on balance, our instinct is towards change rather than continuity: Mr Kerry, not Mr Bush.

Whenever we express a view of that sort, some readers are bound to protest that we, as a publication based in London, should not be poking our noses in other people's politics. Translated, this invariably means that protesters disagree with our choice. It may also, however, reflect a lack of awareness about our readership. *The Economist*'s weekly sales in the United States are about 450,000 copies, which is three times our British sale and roughly 45% of our worldwide total. All those American readers will now be pondering how to vote, or indeed whether to. Thus, as at every presidential election since 1980, we hope it may be useful for us to say how we would think about our vote—if we had one.

The case against George Bush

That decision cannot be separated from the terrible memory of September 11th, nor can it fail to begin as an evaluation of the way in which Mr Bush and his administration responded to that day. For Mr Bush's record during the past three years has been both inspiring and disturbing.

Mr Bush was inspiring in the way he reacted to the new world in which he, and America, found itself. He grasped the magnitude of the challenge well. His military response in Afghanistan was not the sort of poorly directed lashing out that Bill Clinton had used in 1998 after al-Qaeda destroyed two American embassies in east Africa: it was a resolute, measured effort, which was reassuringly sober about the likely length of the campaign against Osama bin Laden and the elusiveness of anything worth the name of victory. Mistakes were made, notably when at Tora

Bora Mr bin Laden and other leaders probably escaped, and when following the war both America and its allies devoted insufficient military and financial resources to helping Afghanistan rebuild itself. But overall, the mission has achieved a lot: the Taliban were removed, al-Qaeda lost its training camps and its base, and Afghanistan has just held elections that bring cautious hope for the central government's future ability to bring stability and prosperity.

The biggest mistake, though, was one that will haunt America for years to come. It lay in dealing with prisoners-of-war by sending hundreds of them to the American base at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, putting them in a legal limbo, outside the Geneva conventions and outside America's own legal system. That act reflected a genuinely difficult problem: that of having captured people of unknown status but many of whom probably did want to kill Americans, at a time when to set them free would have been politically controversial, to say the least. That difficulty cannot neutralise the damage caused by this decision, however. Today, Guantánamo Bay offers constant evidence of America's hypocrisy, evidence that is disturbing for those who sympathise with it, cause-affirming for those who hate it. This administration, which claims to be fighting for justice, the rule of law and liberty, is incarcerating hundreds of people, whether innocent or guilty, without trial or access to legal representation. The White House's proposed remedy, namely military tribunals, merely compounds the problem.

When Mr Bush decided to frame his foreign policy in the sort of language and objectives previously associated with Woodrow Wilson, John Kennedy or Ronald Reagan, he was bound to be greeted with cynicism. Yet he was right to do so. To paraphrase a formula invented by his ally, Tony Blair, Mr Bush was promising to be “tough on terrorism, tough on the causes of terrorism”, and the latter he attributed to the lack of democracy, human rights and opportunity in much of the world, especially the Arab countries. To call for an effort to change that lamentable state of affairs was inspiring and surely correct. The credibility of the call was enhanced by this month's Afghan election, and may in future be enhanced by successful and free elections in Iraq. But that remains ahead, and meanwhile Mr Bush's credibility has been considerably undermined not just by Guantánamo but also by two big things: by the sheer incompetence and hubristic thinking evident in the way in which his team set about the rebuilding of Iraq, once Saddam Hussein's regime had been toppled; and by the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, which strengthened the suspicion that the mistreatment or even torture of prisoners was being condoned.

Invading Iraq was not a mistake. Although the intelligence about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction has been shown to have been flimsy and, with hindsight, wrong, Saddam's record of deception in the 12 years since the first Gulf war meant that it was right not to give him the benefit of the doubt. The containment scheme deployed around him was unsustainable and politically damaging: military bases in holy Saudi Arabia, sanctions that impoverished and even killed Iraqis and would have collapsed. But changing the regime so incompetently was a huge mistake. By having far too few soldiers to provide security and by failing to pay Saddam's remnant army, a task that was always going to be long and hard has been made much, much harder. Such incompetence is no mere detail: thousands of Iraqis have died as a result and hundreds of American soldiers. The eventual success of the mission, while still possible, has been put in unnecessary jeopardy. So has America's reputation in the Islamic world, both for effectiveness and for moral probity.

If Mr Bush had meanwhile been making progress elsewhere in the Middle East, such mistakes might have been neutralised. But he hasn't. Israel and Palestine remain in their bitter conflict, with America readily accusable of bias. In Iran the conservatives have become stronger and the country has moved closer to making nuclear weapons. Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia have not turned hostile, but neither have they been terribly supportive nor reform-minded. Libya's renunciation of WMD is the sole clear piece of progress.

This only makes the longer-term project more important, not less. To succeed, however, America needs a president capable of admitting to mistakes and of learning from them. Mr Bush has steadfastly refused to admit to anything: even after Abu Ghraib, when he had a perfect

opportunity to dismiss Donald Rumsfeld, the defence secretary, and declare a new start, he chose not to. Instead, he treated the abuses as if they were a low-level, disciplinary issue. Can he learn from mistakes? The current approach in Iraq, of training Iraqi security forces and preparing for elections to establish an Iraqi government with popular support, certainly represents an improvement, although America still has too few troops. And no one knows, for example, whether Mr Rumsfeld will stay in his job, or go. In the end, one can do no more than guess about whether in a second term Mr Bush would prove more competent.

Making sense of John Kerry

That does at least place him on equal terms with his rival, Mr Kerry. With any challenger, voters have to make a leap of faith about what the new man might be like in office. What he says during the campaign is a poor guide: Mr Bush said in 2000 that America should be “a humble nation, but strong” and should eschew nation-building; Mr Clinton claimed in 1992 to want to confront “the butchers of Beijing” and to reflate the economy through public spending.

Like those two previous challengers, Mr Kerry has shaped many of his positions to contrast himself with the incumbent. That is par for the course. What is more disconcerting, however, is the way those positions have oscillated, even as the facts behind them have stayed the same. In the American system, given Congress's substantial role, presidents should primarily be chosen for their character, their qualities of leadership, for how they might be expected to deal with the crises that may confront them, abroad or at home. Oscillation, even during an election campaign, is a worrying sign.

If the test is a domestic one, especially an economic crisis, Mr Kerry looks acceptable, however. His record and instincts are as a fiscal conservative, suggesting that he would rightly see future federal budget deficits as a threat. His circle of advisers includes the admirable Robert Rubin, formerly Mr Clinton's treasury secretary. His only big spending plan, on health care, would probably be killed by a Republican Congress. On trade, his position is more debatable: while an avowed free trader with a voting record in the Senate to confirm it, he has flirted with attacks on outsourcing this year and chosen a rank protectionist as his running-mate. He has not yet shown Mr Clinton's talent for advocacy on this issue, or any willingness to confront his rather protectionist party. Still, on social policy, Mr Kerry has a clear advantage: unlike Mr Bush he is not in hock to the Christian right. That will make him a more tolerant, less divisive figure on issues such as abortion, gay marriage and stem-cell research.

The biggest questions, though, must be about foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. That is where his oscillations are most unsettling. A war that he voted to authorise, and earlier this year claimed to support, he now describes as “a mistake”. On some occasions he claims to have been profoundly changed by September 11th and to be determined to seek out and destroy terrorists wherever they are hiding, and on others he has seemed to hark back to the old Clintonian view of terrorism as chiefly a question of law and order. He has failed to offer any set of overall objectives for American foreign policy, though perhaps he could hardly oppose Mr Bush's targets of democracy, human rights and liberty. But instead he has merely offered a different process: deeper thought, more consultation with allies.

So what is Mr Kerry's character? His voting record implies he is a vacillator, but that may be unfair, given the technical nature of many Senate votes. His oscillations this year imply that he is more of a ruthless opportunist. His military record suggests he can certainly be decisive when he has to be and his post-Vietnam campaign showed determination. His reputation for political comebacks and as a strong finisher in elections also indicates a degree of willpower that his flip-flopping otherwise belies.

The task ahead, and the man to fit it

In the end, the choice relies on a judgment about who will be better suited to meet the challenges America is likely to face during the next four years. Those challenges must include the probability of another big terrorist attack, in America or western Europe. They must include the need for a period of discipline in economic policy and for compromise on social policy, lest the nation become weak or divided in the face of danger. Above all, though, they include the need to make a success of the rebuilding of Iraq, as the key part of a broader effort to stabilise, modernise and, yes, democratise the Middle East.

Many readers, feeling that Mr Bush has the right vision in foreign policy even if he has made many mistakes, will conclude that the safest option is to leave him in office to finish the job he has started. If Mr Bush is re-elected, and uses a new team and a new approach to achieve that goal, and shakes off his fealty to an extreme minority, the religious right, then *The Economist* will wish him well. But our confidence in him has been shattered. We agree that his broad vision is the right one but we doubt whether Mr Bush is able to change or has sufficient credibility to succeed, especially in the Islamic world. Iraq's fledgling democracy, if it gets the chance to be born at all, will need support from its neighbours—or at least non-interference—if it is to survive. So will other efforts in the Middle East, particularly concerning Israel and Iran.

John Kerry says the war was a mistake, which is unfortunate if he is to be commander-in-chief of the soldiers charged with fighting it. But his plan for the next phase in Iraq is identical to Mr Bush's, which speaks well of his judgment. He has been forthright about the need to win in Iraq, rather than simply to get out, and will stand a chance of making a fresh start in the Israel-Palestine conflict and (though with even greater difficulty) with Iran. After three necessarily tumultuous and transformative years, this is a time for consolidation, for discipline and for repairing America's moral and practical authority. Furthermore, as Mr Bush has often said, there is a need in life for accountability. He has refused to impose it himself, and so voters should, in our view, impose it on him, given a viable alternative. John Kerry, for all the doubts about him, would be in a better position to carry on with America's great tasks.