

EDITORIAL

Gambler-in-Chief

This is not what anybody could have reasonably expected from George W. Bush.

Elected in one of the closest contests in American history, with limited experience in government, and now managing with only the thinnest of margins in both houses of Congress, he has proposed one of the most radical agendas, both domestic and foreign, in modern times. Not only is he about to plunge ahead with a war about which a good segment of the public has serious misgivings, but in the same week that his administration made the case for the war he also proposed cutting taxes. That's right: He wants billions for the war and reconstruction of Iraq even while he cuts back on government revenue, a policy of guns and butter that has proven a disaster in the past.

In addition, the sum of his tax proposals is nothing less than a wholesale restructuring of the progressive tax system. And he says he wants to fundamentally change the nation's most important social programs, including Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. Since taking office, Bush has also trashed nearly 40 years of arms-control policy and committed himself to building a multi-billion dollar anti-ballistic missile system that many experts say won't work.

Indeed, the Gambler-in-Chief.

It is a breathtakingly bold agenda. Not just conservative, but radical. And it's dangerous. Failure in just a few areas could cause economic havoc or further destabilize already-roiling parts of the world and require long-term commitments of our blood and money.

And the very ambitiousness of it runs counter to the experience of most modern administrations: that a White House staff can focus on only one major initiative at a time, maybe two. But Bush has thrown a dozen balls in the air, and is trying to juggle them all at the same time. Even assuming some of his programs move to a back burner, his agenda remains incredibly ambitious -- and risky. Some would call this leadership, others foolishness. What is also stunning is that few expected such an agenda from a man with such a modest (to be kind) background in public affairs. Nothing from his days as governor of Texas or in his presidential campaign suggested such a radical, high-risk agenda. In fact, Bush ran as a compassionate conservative, strongly indicating he was a centrist Republican with a conservative bent.

More Gingrich than Gipper

That is not how he has tried to govern. Some suggest he is the natural heir to Ronald Reagan. But Reagan sounded more conservative than he governed. Bush is more like former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), the pit bull conservative who advanced a radically conservative agenda with the fervor of a religious crusader.

The best example might be the war against Iraq. No matter what you think about confronting Saddam Hussein and his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction -- and this editorial page believes that Hussein needs to be confronted -- why Bush decided it had to be done now, in the middle of the war on terrorism, is hard to fathom. Now that Bush has forced the United Nations to commit itself to disarming Iraq and the administration has moved all the machinery of war into place, there might be little choice but to go ahead and do the job. But why did Bush have to begin all this now? Wasn't it enough to take on al-Qaida and try to rebuild Afghanistan? Shouldn't Osama bin Laden still be the prime target, not Hussein?

Gambling on Iraq

There is a real possibility that the controversial effort to disarm Iraq has so angered some other nations that it will become more difficult to gain cooperation in the war against terrorism. And a war with Iraq, even if you conclude it's necessary, is still a gamble. One gamble is that Hussein, with his back to the wall, will not use his weapons of mass destruction either on our troops or in a terrorist attack on the homeland -- or that the United States can prevent him from doing so. And it's also a gamble that a U.S. attack in the heart of the Mideast will not result in more recruits for the bin Ladens of the world. Or that the long-term presence of U.S. troops in Iraq won't cause more problems than it solves.

Or, take his budget -- with its deficits for years to come. His figures don't include what the war in Iraq is going to cost or what the price for rebuilding Iraq will be. His budget takes away the funds earmarked to keep Social Security solvent for the baby boom generation. It also gambles on a theory that a lot of reputable economists think is hogwash: that tax cuts will always stimulate the economy and ultimately bring in more revenue than they lose. Supply-side economics was a gamble in 1981 and it's a gamble today.

Bush's plan to fight a war and cut taxes at the same time is even more of a gamble. The last president to try that was Lyndon Johnson and it contributed significantly to the economic woes, high inflation and lack of growth of the late 1960s and early '70s. Trying that approach again must be classified a high-stakes gamble.

The concept of privatizing part of Social Security may -- or may not -- make sense, but there has to be a way of getting from here to there. That is, how do we go from the current system to one in which there are private investments without gutting the current system? The only way to do it would be to use a whopping budget surplus to cover the transition. Bush is gambling supply-side economics will bring about that surplus. That's beyond high stakes; it's foolish, given the entire economic picture.

Maybe the inertia of governing will slow down Bush and force him to prioritize. Maybe the war in Iraq will so take his attention that other projects will fall by the wayside. Maybe the Democrats will find a way to flex their reduced muscles and put the brakes on the Gambler-in-Chief. That's the way the system is supposed to work.

It Could Pay Off

And maybe the gambles will pay off. Maybe the United States will triumph easily in Iraq and its rebuilding project will be the stimulus for a new, more democratic Mideast. And maybe the natural economic cycle will come through in time to fund the programs that looked as if they were going to be bankrupted by the tax cuts. That's not inconceivable.

But, have no doubt about it, Bush is gambling big time that he can pull it off. He either needs to be slowed down or Americans will need a lot of luck.

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