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History Will Remember Bush Well

Iraq looks good compared to the Korea that Harry Truman left behind.

By **MARC A. THIESSEN**

In August 1951, with a little more than a year left to Harry S. Truman's presidency, historian Henry Steele Commager published an essay in *Look* magazine with this prediction: "By all normal standards, [Truman's] Administration has been one of almost . . . unparalleled success . . . the verdict of history will not be the same as the verdict of contemporary critics."

At the time, Truman's popularity hovered in the low 20s and most Americans considered his presidency a failure. *Look's* editors even published a note declaring "doubts" about "whether history will accord Harry S. Truman as generous a place as Professor Commager assigns him." History eventually sided with Commager.

Today, President George W. Bush leaves office with approval ratings only slightly higher than Truman's. And I will make this prediction: The verdict of history on the Bush presidency will not be the same as the verdict of contemporary critics.

While Mr. Bush made mistakes during his time in office, like Truman he racked up a record of unparalleled success that will be increasingly appreciated in the years to come.

Like Truman at the start of the Cold War, Mr. Bush set our nation's course at the start of a new and unprecedented war. And like Truman, he responded by laying out a clear doctrine to guide America through the conflict. Mr. Bush created the institutions necessary to prevail in this struggle. He created the Department of Homeland Security and a new director of national intelligence. He transformed the FBI and the Justice Department to fight terror. He established new military commands. And he transformed NATO from a defensive alliance into an expeditionary alliance that is now leading the fight in Afghanistan.

Mr. Bush signed the Patriot Act, breaking down the walls between intelligence and law enforcement. He created a terrorist surveillance program. He directed the CIA to detain and question captured terrorist leaders. He drove al Qaeda from its Afghan sanctuary and put America on the offensive. As a result, more than seven years have passed since 9/11 without another attack on our soil. That's an achievement few thought possible when the rubble of the World Trade

Center was still burning.

Like Truman in Korea, Mr. Bush imperfectly fought an unpopular war in Iraq. Yet just as most Americans now see our success in Korea as essential to our victory in the Cold War, it will one day be clear that our success in Iraq was essential to our victory in the war on terror. And the success Mr. Bush delivered in Iraq is far more complete than the stalemate that endures on the Korean Peninsula.

As Mr. Bush leaves office, Iraq is a unified and free country, and our enemies there have suffered a devastating defeat. If his successor does not squander that victory, a free Iraq will one day be to the Middle East what a free South Korea has been to Asia.

Like Truman, Mr. Bush made a first, failed attempt to solve difficult domestic challenges. Truman failed to get Congress to approve national health insurance for the elderly. But two decades later, President Lyndon Johnson invited Truman to join him as he signed legislation creating Medicare.

Similarly, Mr. Bush failed to get Congress to pass immigration and Social Security reforms. But years from now, Congress will have to act on these issues. When it does, I predict a future president will invite Mr. Bush to watch as the reforms are signed into law.

When President Truman left office, his fellow liberals blamed him for handing the White House to the Republicans. Today, Truman is a liberal icon.

Similarly, many conservatives who are angry with Mr. Bush today will take a better view of his presidency with the passage of time. While he took actions that dispirited some conservatives -- from bailing out the auto industry to taking North Korea off of the list of state sponsors of terror -- Mr. Bush did more to advance conservative priorities than any other president.

Mr. Bush enacted sweeping tax cuts. And he has the best record on judges of any Republican president -- his appointments of Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito will be judged favorably over time compared to Justices Anthony Kennedy, Sandra Day O'Connor, David Souter and John Paul Stevens (all put on the high court by Republican presidents). Mr. Bush enacted free-trade agreements with 17 nations, more than any president in history. He created Health Savings Accounts -- the most important free-market health-care reform in a generation. And he defeated Democratic efforts to use the State Children's Health Insurance Program (Schip) to nationalize health care.

Mr. Bush won a Supreme Court ruling declaring school vouchers constitutional and enacted the nation's first school-choice program in the District of Columbia. He has been the most pro-life president in history, securing passage of the Born-Alive Infants Protection Act, the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, and the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act. He refused to fund the destruction of human embryos for research -- and was vindicated by the scientific breakthroughs that followed.

Mr. Bush increased defense spending by nearly 73%, the largest increase since the Truman administration. He unsigned the International Criminal Court treaty, withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and fulfilled Ronald Reagan's promise to deploy defenses against ballistic missiles. This is a conservative record without parallel.

In his final months, Mr. Bush confronted a challenge Truman never faced -- a massive financial crisis. It is hard for many Americans to appreciate the magnitude of the economic collapse the president averted. But history will show that Mr. Bush's actions in the fall of 2008 rescued our economy and saved our financial system.

Mr. Bush often told his staff that a president's job is not to chase popularity, but to do what is right. His insistence in following this philosophy is why he has low approval ratings, and why he has been a great president. Mr. Bush has led a history-making presidency and, like Truman, history will be kinder to our 43rd president than the polls indicate as he leaves office.

Mr. Thiessen was chief speechwriter for President George W. Bush.

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