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# Bush Was Right When It Mattered Most

By KARL ROVE

Its call sign has always been Air Force One. But on Tuesday, it was Special Air Mission 28000, as former President George W. Bush and his wife Laura returned home to Texas on a plane full of family, friends, former staff and memories of eight years in the White House.

The former president and his wife thanked each passenger, showing the thoughtfulness and grace so characteristic of this wonderful American family.

A video tribute produced warm laughter and inevitable tears. There was no bitterness, but rather a sense of gratitude -- gratitude for the opportunity to serve, for able and loyal colleagues, and above all for our country and its people.

Yet, as Mr. Bush left Washington, in a last angry frenzy his critics again distorted his record, maligned his character and repeated untruths about his years in the Oval Office. Nothing they wrote or said changes the essential facts.

To start with, Mr. Bush was right about Iraq. The world is safer without Saddam Hussein in power. And the former president was right to change strategy and surge more U.S. troops.

A legion of critics (including President Barack Obama) claimed it couldn't work. They were wrong. Iraq is now on the mend, the war is on the path to victory, al Qaeda has been dealt a humiliating defeat, and a democracy in the heart of the Arab world is emerging. The success of Mr. Bush's surge made it possible for President Obama to warn terrorists on Tuesday "you cannot outlast us."

Mr. Bush was right to establish a doctrine that holds those who harbor, train and support terrorists as responsible as the terrorists themselves. He was right to take the war on terror abroad instead of waiting until dangers fully materialize here at home. He was right to strengthen the military and intelligence and to create the new tools to monitor the communications of terrorists, freeze their assets, foil their plots, and kill and capture their operators.

These tough decisions -- which became unpopular in certain quarters only when

memories of 9/11 began to fade -- kept America safe for seven years and made it possible for Mr. Obama to tell the terrorists on Tuesday "we will defeat you."

Mr. Bush was right to be a unilateralist when it came to combating AIDS in Africa. While world leaders dithered, his President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief initiative brought lifesaving antiretroviral drugs to millions of Africans.

At home, Mr. Bush cut income taxes for every American who pays taxes. He also cut taxes on capital, investment and savings. The result was 52 months of growth and the strongest economy of any developed country.

Mr. Bush was right to match tax cuts with spending restraint. This is a source of dispute, especially among conservatives, but the record is there to see. Bill Clinton's last budget increased domestic nonsecurity discretionary spending by 16%. Mr. Bush cut that to 6.2% growth in his first budget, 5.5% in his second, 4.3% in his third, 2.2% in his fourth, and then below inflation, on average, since. That isn't the sum total of the fiscal record, of course -- but it's a key part of it.

He was right to have modernized Medicare with prescription drug benefits provided through competition, not delivered by government. The program is costing 40% less than projected because market forces dominate and people -- not government -- are making the decisions.

Mr. Bush was right to pass No Child Left Behind (NCLB), requiring states to set up tough accountability systems that measure every child's progress at school. As a result, reading and math scores have risen more in the last five years since NCLB than in the prior 28 years.

He was right to stand for a culture of life. And he was right to appoint conservative judges who strictly interpret the Constitution.

And Mr. Bush, a man of core decency and integrity, was right not to reply in kind when Democratic leaders called him a liar and a loser. The price of trying to change the tone in Washington was to be often pummeled by lesser men.

Few presidents had as many challenges arise during their eight years, had as many tough calls to make in such a partisan-charged environment, or had to act in the face of such hostile media and elite opinion.

On board Special Air Mission 28000, I remembered the picture I carried in my pocket on my first Air Force One flight eight years ago. It was an old black-and-white snapshot with scalloped edges. It showed Lyndon Johnson in the Cabinet Room, head in hand, weeping over a Vietnam casualty report. George Christian, LBJ's press secretary, gave it to me as a reminder that the job could break anyone, no matter how big and tough.

But despite facing challenges and crises few others have, the job did not break

George W. Bush. Though older and grayer, his brows more furrowed, he is the same man he was, a person of integrity who did what he believed was right. And he exits knowing he summoned all of his energy and talents to defend America and advance its ideals at home and abroad. He didn't get everything right -- no president does -- but he got the most important things right. And that is enough.

**Mr. Rove is the former senior adviser and deputy chief of staff to President George W. Bush.**

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