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# The 9/11 Presidency

Long after George W. Bush boards Marine One next Tuesday bound for Texas, the enduring image of his epochal eight years will be the September 20, 2001 evening a relatively new President stood before a nation traumatized and in mourning.

"We will direct every resource at our command -- every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war -- to the disruption and to the defeat of the global terror network," Mr. Bush told a Joint Session of Congress. "I will not yield; I will not rest; I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people."

In that moment, he set the standard for the Bush Presidency: To protect Americans from another 9/11 and hit Islamist terrorists and their sponsors abroad. Whatever history's ultimate judgment, Mr. Bush never did yield. Nearly all the significant battles of the Bush years -- the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, Guantanamo and wiretapping, upheavals in the Middle East, America's troubles with Europe -- stemmed directly from his response to the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon that defined his Presidency.

By his own standard, Mr. Bush achieved the one big thing he and all Americans demanded of his Administration. Not a single man, woman or child has been killed by terrorists on U.S. soil since the morning of September 11. Al Qaeda was flushed from safe havens in Afghanistan, then Iraq, and its terrorist network put under siege around the world. All subsequent terror attacks hit soft targets and used primitive means. No one seriously predicted such an outcome at the time.

The Administration's achievement goes beyond lives saved to American confidence restored. Memories fade fast. Recall the fear about imminent strikes, the anthrax panic and the 98-1 Senate vote for the Patriot Act in the weeks after 9/11. Americans yearned for leadership that this President provided. He calmed the fears and urged tolerance at home, saying on that memorable evening, "We are in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them."

A measure of the Administration's success is the criticism it has drawn as the

threat has seemed more remote. Bush-bashing, whether from the netroots, David Letterman or the French, would have no resonance in a country that still feared a terrorist attack. Mr. Bush made a conscious choice to take no chances with American lives, and to live with the liberal backlash over waterboarding Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

His most controversial and difficult decision, the war in Iraq, was consistent with his post-9/11 doctrine to regard "any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism . . . as a hostile regime" and pre-empt threats to America from rogue regimes and proliferators. The failure to discover WMD gave opponents the opening to claim the war was fought on false premises, but Bill Clinton, Democrats on Capitol Hill and every major intelligence service also believed Saddam had WMD.

Other mistakes were inevitably made, and not merely that "Mission Accomplished" banner aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln. Persuasion matters in politics, and Mr. Bush lacked the communication skills to explain his policies well. The Administration botched the early job in post-Saddam Iraq, taking too long to empower Iraqis and failing to anticipate the insurgency. But the successful "surge" -- a decision made against almost universal opposition in Washington -- prevented a U.S. defeat and leaves to Barack Obama a democratic ally gaining strength in a crucial region.

The slow but indisputable emergence of a free Iraq also shook up an untenable status quo in the Middle East, the root source of the terrorist threat. Though Saddam bluffed about his WMD, the U.S. intervention signaled its seriousness to other proliferators. A.Q. Khan's nuclear network, which flourished in the 1990s, was rolled up in the wake of Iraq. Moammar Gadhafi gave up Libya's nuclear program, which was far more advanced than previously thought.

Mr. Bush's Afghan campaign started brilliantly, toppling the Taliban despite warnings in Washington that such "regime change" was dangerous. The ability of al Qaeda to reconstitute itself to some degree along the Afghan-Pakistan border is mainly due to unstable governance in Pakistan -- and will be no easier for Mr. Obama. Mr. Bush's engagement with Islamabad did ease Indian-Pakistan tensions, helped to capture KSM and others, and has allowed U.S. Predators to strike at terror targets inside Pakistan.

In his second Inaugural, the President declared the U.S. would "seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." Lebanon's Cedar Revolution came a month later. But the "freedom agenda" ran aground against the Hezbollah, Hamas and Iraq setbacks of 2006 and has never recovered. Still, the idea that freedom and Islam are compatible has been planted and will not be

forever contained in the region.

On his own post-9/11 terms, Mr. Bush's biggest failure has been Iran. He outsourced diplomacy to the Europeans and U.N. -- despite his caricature as a go-it-alone cowboy. But these efforts merely gave the mullahs cover and years to build their bomb. The President also indulged Condoleezza Rice's illusion that some grand bargain could be found with Tehran's revolutionary regime. The same could be said for his diplomatic dead end in North Korea.

The President tried smooth talk on Vladimir Putin, with equally poor results. His famous misreading of the man gave the Kremlin confidence to repress its own people and intimidate its neighbors without fear of serious U.S. rebuke. Mr. Bush did stay a stalwart ally to the young democracies in that region, helping keep Ukraine and Georgia, so far, out of Moscow's reconstituting empire.

For a President charged so often with tarnishing alliances, the state of our friendships is also worth revisiting. The world didn't gang up against the "unilateral" U.S., Jacques Chirac's efforts notwithstanding. On the contrary, though you won't hear this from the media, relations with Europe are stronger than at the beginning of the Bush years. France, Germany and the U.K. -- aware of the rising threat from Russia and their own shortcomings -- are eager for U.S. support and leadership, out of self-interest if not any deep love.

In Asia, the Bush Presidency began with a crisis with China over the downing of a military aircraft, but U.S.-China ties have since been friendly and stable. Mr. Bush's biggest achievement, also overlooked, is the new alliance with the continent's leading democracy, India. This relationship will help future Administrations check Chinese ambitions -- as will strengthened friendships with Japan, South Korea and Australia.

The postmortems on Mr. Bush's foreign policy inevitably note his comment in the 2000 Presidential debate about "a humble nation," disinclined to act abroad, to paint him as the unlikely revolutionary. The future President's more telling statement in that debate came in response to a question about what principles would guide him. He said he'd ask himself: "What's in the best interest of our people?"

A clear conception of national interest shaped his response to the great security challenge of the early 21st century. After the Clinton decade in which al Qaeda and proliferation went unchallenged, the Bush Presidency had to scramble to defend against a terror threat that with WMD could kill millions of Americans. His decision to fight this as a "war," and to marshal the means attendant to war, has been controversial and expensive. But like Harry Truman's decisions at the onset of the Cold War, we suspect more of his policy will survive than his many

critics now admit. (See here, for starters.)

The world remains a very dangerous place. Yet thanks to Mr. Bush's post-9/11 willingness to act decisively, and at the risk of his own popularity, Americans are safer today than on September 10, 2001.

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