

THE BUSH PRESIDENCY AND THE POLITICAL PARTIES AFTER THE GULF WAR

To explore George Bush's standing as president and the comparative strength of the two major parties at this juncture, after the war with Iraq and just before the campaigns for the critical 1992 elections have shifted into forward gear, Public Perspective talked to two respected electoral and opinion analysts—Republican Richard Wirthlin and Democrat Geoffrey Garin. We began by asking each—in separate interviews—whether the political standing of the Bush presidency has been transformed as a result of his handling of the Gulf crisis.

INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD B. WIRTHLIN

Successful wars drive presidential ratings higher than any other events. That is especially true when a war is viewed by the public as both necessary and successful. Such wars at this historical juncture must: (1) be against a foe who has clearly breached international norms and standards; (2) be fought against a personalized villain—a role Saddam Hussein abundantly filled; and (3) result in a clear-cut resolution of the conflict. All of those things worked very much to President Bush's advantage in the Gulf conflict. Kurdish suffering in the post war did not diminish the way Americans viewed President Bush. Still, it's quite remarkable that he got as high a set of ratings as he did, and especially significant that, in our national omnibus study of March 1991, when his overall approval percentage stood at 82, fully 56% of those we interviewed *strongly approved* of what he was doing. That's a very high number indeed.

PP: How does the 56% strongly approving compare to Ronald Reagan's best figures?

RBW: Two of Mr. Reagan's best marks overall came in our studies of November 1985, 75% approval, and April 1986—also 75%. It's my recollection that in one of our tracking studies, right after the Geneva Summit, it went a little higher than that, pushing into the high 70s. At these points, however, only about 40-42% strongly approved. So, Bush's 56% is unusually strong. The question, of course, remains, "How firm is Bush's present standing?" Ratings of 70% and higher are "stratospheric"; it's hard for even a popular president to breath oxygen at that altitude.

When the president is perceived to be the primary agent of positive change, when he seems to control that change in a manner consistent with Americans' expectations and values, then his job ratings soar. But, like all mortals, presidents don't always induce positive change: They sometimes are themselves the victims of change. If you go back, for example, and look at Roosevelt's popularity in the middle of 1940, he lost 18% off his job rating between May and September. While there were not a lot of published polls during the war, his rating again fell 15 to 16 percentage points from the beginning to the middle of 1942. Dwight Eisenhower, another popular president,

INTERVIEW WITH GEOFFREY GARIN

George Bush clearly helped himself and his political standing a great deal during the Persian Gulf crisis, but I have genuine doubts about the permanence and the depth of the change. In several polls I have conducted in states where there will be Senate elections in 1992, I've asked a "would you re-elect" question about Bush and incumbent Democratic senators. The question on the president goes this way: "George Bush will be running for reelection as the Republican candidate for president. Would you definitely vote for Bush, probably vote for Bush, probably vote for the Democrat or definitely vote for the Democrat?" Then, as I've said, we ask a parallel question about the incumbent Democratic senators—at least one of whom the Republicans would claim to be on a marginal list. In each case Bush was at or just below 50%, and what's more running behind the incumbent senators, including the more marginal one. So, while George Bush gets an awful lot of personal respect from voters, the depth of the political loyalty to him is still suspect.

PP: Would the typical responses you've referred to be on the order of 48% to re-elect Bush, 35% for the Democrat?

GG: "The Democrat" would be substantially below Bush—more likely in the high 20s, with a large undecided group. But again, I would have expected a substantially higher number for the president. And in terms of his approval rating, we find that even at the peak of his popularity it's been evenly divided between people who approve strongly and those who approve only mildly of his performance. He has a base from the mid-30s to the high 40s [percentages] of people who are thorough-going Bushites; beyond that there's a lot of softness. Another key measurement comes from a national survey I've just completed, where three-quarters of the electorate said they were dissatisfied with economic conditions. When asked to rate the President's performance on economic issues, respondents were evenly divided between approval and disapproval. It all adds up to something less than superhero status.

PP: Is the economy Bush's main point of vulnerability as you see it for 1992?

GG: It's a real weak point—and in ways that go beyond the traditional statistics on overall economic performance.

was subject to events he couldn't control. His job rating peaked at the end of 1956 at about 78%. Then he got into the budget battle and sent troops to Little Rock and his standing dropped—and his job rating didn't recover until he sent Marines to Lebanon. It fell again in the latter part of 1959 and early 1960, after the U-2 incident and the cancellation of a scheduled trip to Japan. Of all the presidents since Roosevelt, Eisenhower's approval ratings are probably the most stable; yet from the end of 1959 to the middle of 1960, his approval fell from about 75% to 50%. Hence, no president can "bank" job approval with any certainty.

Still, I must say that things at this moment look favorable, indeed, for George Bush. First, it's unlikely he will again be ridiculed as weak or, in the vernacular, a wimp; he has completely buried that charge forever. Another different kind of factor in his favor involves the shift in party identification toward the Republicans. When I put the strategy together for the Reagan campaign in the spring of 1980, 51% of Americans identified as Democrats, and only 28% as Republicans. During the Reagan years those Democratic advantages fell sharply, to the single-digit range. This shift is continuing: Our January 1991 survey showed a 3% Republican advantage, and studies by others show the party at least at parity. Watch carefully, however, as we move into next year and see if the current GOP position holds up. If in fact Republicans have even a slight margin of 3 or 4% a year from now, that small advantage in party identification will provide George Bush with a strong political buffer that he didn't have in 1989 and Ronald Reagan certainly didn't have in 1980.

Another positive component in Bush's present position is the likelihood that we are not going to get into a gut-wrenching recession. While indexes of consumer confidence are not always good predictors of economic health down the road, they're not bad leading indicators if taken in conjunction with other measures. We just recorded one of the sharpest recoveries in consumer confidence we have ever seen; I think that's been reflected in the Conference Board and Michigan Survey Research Center data as well. And what happens to real per capita disposable income from November of this year to October of next will provide the ultimate indicator of the presidents's re-election prospects. At this moment it seems likely that the economy will be looking better by the end of the year.

A final factor I would cite as an element that bodes well for President George Bush is the absence of strong Democratic challengers. Of all of the political advantages Bush has gained from the last two or three months, I would put this one near the top of the list. The Democrats must soon get someone to challenge Bush, someone who can make their case eloquently and, of course, begin to put together the organizational nuts and bolts of a presidential

This is, from a political perspective, an unusual recession in that unemployment is not the leading concern; rather people are much more troubled about the rising prices for necessities, whether it's health care, housing, higher education, or whatever. Even if the unemployment figures improve, people will feel hard pressed well into the 1992 political year. There is a perception among middle-class people that Bush doesn't particularly understand their economic problems, let alone have any particular solution to them.

PP: Compare your "re-elect" data to the trial heats we see in the public polls. For example, the NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll of March 15-19 recorded 67% saying they would vote for Bush, just 22% for Mario Cuomo. Do you consider the latter findings misleading?

GG: Indeed. They don't at all foreshadow what 1992 will be like or be about. Should some potential Democratic nominees take such numbers seriously and not run as a result, they will come to be very sorry about that.

PP: At this point when a lot of people are discussing the Democrats' liabilities with regard to the presidency in 1992, tell us what you see from your surveys or otherwise as to the party's assets.

GG: The most important asset is that on economic issues, the Democrats are seen as much more of the party of the middle class than the Republicans are. Given the political dynamics of 1991 and 1992, this is critical. There is a very strong feeling of economic turmoil and frustration among middle class people. I worked in a series of Senate and congressional campaigns in 1990 where for a variety of reasons we shouldn't have come close, and yet where it turned out to be close, and where we even won in some cases, precisely because of this economic feeling. Tim Roemer, the new congressman from Indiana, is a good example of somebody who used this issue very well. Harvey Sloane in Kentucky, who ended up with 48% of the vote really against all odds and all expectations of doing anything close to that, did so well primarily because these economic frustrations were so strong and the Democrats were seen as the party of the middle class. In addition, on a lot of the issues that are out there right now, including health care and jobs, Democrats still have a very significant advantage.

PP: In public polls, too, on questions asking which party cares more about people like you, or which is better for the middle class, the Democrats get the edge. [See the Public Opinion Report of this issue, p. 90.] On the other hand, asking which party is more sympathetic to interests of the rich finds Republicans heavily cited. And yet, when we look at presidential voting over this long stretch from the 1968 contest on, Republicans have been winning. Obvi-

campaign. Of those Democrats now actively seeking the nomination, while they may be good men, none represent a serious challenge to the President.

Nevertheless, the Democrats clearly have some issue assets. At present Bush must in my view exercise care in the way he handles domestic policy. I don't believe he can walk away from it with political impunity. I was happy that he recently staked out a strong position on education. But if the economy recovers, it's going to be hard for the Democrats to leverage any one issue.

PP: One other question about Bush himself. Over his presidency the comment has been made a thousand times that, yes, he's got good numbers in approval, but his popularity is a "mile wide and an inch deep". You've touched on this matter in noting that now a very large proportion say they strongly approve his presidency. Still, there's the notion that Reagan had an "army" which Bush lacks. How does this assessment look to you?

RBW: The times and the sequence of political change are different today than they were with Reagan. Basically, I think the assessment is true that he lacks "a political army" in the sense that there were many more "true believers" who were willing to walk over hot coals for Reagan—he had that kind of army. His campaign was a crusade. There was the sense of really making an historic difference, which swept through the ranks of the conservative Republicans in 1979, 1980, 1981. And there was in fact a major agenda change. Such moments of political history generate a kind of single-minded enthusiasm for a national leader. We saw the same thing occur with FDR.

In contrast, the international and domestic agendas for Bush remain pretty much the same as they were for Reagan. There isn't any sweeping historical shift. But while this means Bush won't have an army of believers like those that marshalled behind Reagan, it also means that such an army really isn't needed for what President Bush may want to accomplish. In many ways he's following much the same agenda as his predecessor, with perhaps a softer, gentler tone. What Bush does need, of course, is strong overall public approval, which he can draw upon to help sustain him in pursuing his legislative objectives. Without question, Bush's job rating has become firmer. It has crystallized more positively as a consequence of the last three or four months.

Whether that in turn translates into major gains by Republicans across congressional and gubernatorial balloting in 1992 is still an open question. If you'd asked me six months ago what were the chances of substantial GOP gains in the House and Senate next year, I would have said they were slight—even though at that point I felt Bush's position was strong. Today, I think there's a possibility

ously there are a lot of things on people's minds when they cast presidential votes, but if the Democrats are seen as the party of ordinary people, why don't they get more ordinary people to vote for them?

GG: Well, I think that the party of ordinary people still needs to have extraordinary candidates. In 1980 and 1984, although I disagree with the outcome, the voters' decisions were logical in the context of the times. People were enormously unhappy with the status quo in 1980, and they voted for change. By 1984, they felt a lot more comfortable with things and believed that the country had changed for the better; sticking with Reagan made sense in that context. But in 1988, I believed from the outset that the Democrats could win, and I believe today that the Democrats should have won the election, precisely because of the economic issues I have discussed. The story of 1988 is not about the failure of these economic issues, but the failure of a particular Democratic campaign to make the voters feel comfortable with the nominee and to take advantage of the opportunities. Michael Dukakis in 1988 didn't want to be the candidate of economic doom and gloom, and until the very end of the campaign didn't talk about a lot of the economic difficulties. Democrats really can't afford to make that mistake again in 1992.

PP: A moment ago you said that if any Democrat looks at the trial heats and sees Bush way ahead and doesn't run as a result, that candidate would be making a mistake. As you look around the country, are Democrats backing away from making runs for Congress in the aftermath of the Gulf War?

GG: No. Part of the irony is that, while we are only four months into the 1992 election cycle, we have already had a more successful recruiting cycle for the Senate than we had for the entire 1990 campaign. In the Democratic challenge races, last time we could not persuade a single sitting member of the House to challenge a Republican senator. It was the first time since the New Deal days when there wasn't a single Democratic governor or member of Congress running for the US Senate. Now it appears that Richard Stallings in Idaho is prepared to take on Steve Symms, in a very conservative state. In Oregon, Les AuCoin or Peter DeFazio will take on Bob Packwood. It appears likely that Dan Glickman will go against Bob Dole in Kansas and Bob Mrazek is challenging Al D'Amato in New York. So, if anything, it seems that the Democrats are now more willing to press forward than they were two years ago. This is very much a reflection of the fact that when these Democrats go home, they hear about these economic and social issues I've mentioned, rather than about the war. Voters are saying quite clearly that in terms of our domestic economic policies they want a change in Washington—a change much more oriented to the needs of middle class people.

that we could see a bigger shift in the party line-up in both houses in 1992 than we've seen in some time. Why? Because of the significant shift in party ID. Moving from a 23 point deficit to a six or seven point advantage is a shift that you and I will likely see only once in our lifetimes.

Of course, the major question is, will that advantage hold? Work we have done clearly shows that party ID isn't the stable bedrock it was or at least was thought to be in earlier times. It's pretty fluid. But if the Republicans should go into the 1992 fall balloting with, say, a 6 point lead, that puts in reach a lot of Democratic seats which weren't considered vulnerable four months ago.

This brings us directly to the issue of realignment. I still think there has been a "rolling" realignment—rolling in the sense that it has clearly moved in one direction, but also rolling in the sense that it isn't firm. It's neither embedded nor stabilized. Realignment to me means first, a major shift in the national agenda—which did in fact occur in 1979 and 1980. Second, it takes a charismatic leader to see that many of those agenda changes are reflected in national legislation—something which Ronald Reagan accomplished. Third, it requires a major shift in party ID, which we have had. The fourth component of an enduring realignment hasn't occurred, however, and I don't think it's likely to be realized in the near future. In order to provide permanence to the first three components of realignment, they must be institutionalized through redistricting in the state legislatures. The party which controls state legislatures has the power to fashion the composition of each congressional district and therethrough controls the most fundamental political lever. While the Republicans may continue to make gains in other areas, their inability to end the dominance of Democratic legislatures places a lid on their other partisan gains.

PP: When you look at Republicans making big gains in party ID—and dominating presidential balloting, while the Democrats control legislatures national and state, what's your principal interpretation? How much does the split reflect ambivalent feelings in the public as to the proper course of public policy—people liking the Republicans in some ways and Democrats in others, and hence splitting their votes to achieve divergent ends? Conversely, does divided government instead reflect simply the cutting off of legislative races from party and policy—with the results reflecting such things as incumbency advantages? How much does the public want a Republican presidency along side a Democratic Congress, or is this split just an unintended by-product of other factors?

RBW: I believe that the main reason for the partisan split at the legislative and presidential levels stems primarily from the power of congressional and legislative incum-

PP: Looking at the range of poll findings on party identification, from 1980 to the present [see pp. 18-21] while polling organizations vary considerably in the pictures they provide at any one point in time, and while there's an awful lot of bounce in these figures, the Republicans are clearly stronger in the latter part of the period—1989-91—than they were in the first part, according to every one of the survey organizations.

GG: I believe that's true.

PP: Why? What has accounted for this at least modest realignment?

GG: "Modest" is your word. I'd probably say "temporary." The most recent figures are very much a response to the war. There have been relatively few positive stories about the Democratic party written in the last several months. The other truism of American politics is that nothing succeeds like success. The Republicans have had a spell of it recently, and have benefitted from it, but the pendulum will swing back the other way. There hasn't been any real permanence to party ID figures for some years now. Emphasizing them has become silly, because for many people professed party identification is very soft, a reaction to specific events. If I ask party ID at the end of the questionnaire in a survey on economic issues, I will get a higher Democratic figure; if the survey is mainly about foreign policy—surprise, surprise—I will get a higher Republican proportion. Voters don't invest a lot when they announce partisan preference. Analysts still treat party identification as if they were asking the respondents' age, or gender. It's not that at all. It's much more akin analytically to asking, "How do you feel about the way things are going in the country today?" It's very fluid. Of course, it didn't used to be like that. Party once meant a lot more to people than it does now.

PP: So, in effect, the whole idea of party identification as Gallup introduced it in his surveys of the 30s and a great many political scientists have employed it, should now be buried?

GG: It's certainly a lot less meaningful. Experience shows us that even in the most Democratic states, there are enough people who are open-minded to a Republican to elect him. And even in the most Republican and conservative state, there are enough people who are open-minded about Democrats to elect them.

PP: If we asked one hundred of the most politically knowledgeable people privately about the likely 1992 election outcomes, a pretty large majority would say they expect the Democrats to win both Houses of Congress, and the Republicans to win the White House again. Whether this actually happens in 1992 we will see, but

bency. Incumbents can show that they are serving their districts in ways large and small, and this has buffered them from what otherwise would be more frequent political change. Also, we have found that Americans are quite comfortable with today's divided government—a unique expression of the separation of powers. In the early 1980s Republicans tried to see whether they might leverage the fact that President Reagan could accomplish more if he had a Republican House and Senate. They found that that argument fell on deaf ears. Many of our respondents told us that argument didn't really carry much weight because they believed it was a "good thing" to have Democrats controlling Congress, and Republicans controlling the White House. Nevertheless, in all practicality, I don't believe that many Americans go through that reasoning process and decide we need a balance, and hence will vote top of the ticket Republican but also for a Democratic Congress. Voting for a congressman is a much more pragmatic matter of who they know, and of some more narrow constituency issues.

PP: But even in face of these incumbency advantages and constituency issues which have buttressed the Democrats' legislative position, you see enough going on with regard to Bush's standing on the one hand and the Republican pick-up in party ID on the other, to conclude there is some prospect of significant change in the partisan make-up of Congress in 1992?

RBW: That I do. And I would feel much more comfortable about that if, a year from now, party ID still gives the Republicans an edge. At the end of the 1988 campaign we did an analysis of what factors explain the vote for a variety of offices including president; party allegiance, while not the sole and even in some regards the most significant explanatory variable, nevertheless, "explains" why people voted for candidates. The challenge for the Republican party is to leverage the advantages of party identification, especially among younger voters. A good get-out-the-vote effort will clearly help the party. It wasn't too long ago when Republicans hoped for rain and snow and sleet on November election day. Now, they should hope for warmth and sunshine.

Richard B. Wirthlin is chairman of the Wirthlin Group

split control has been the result for a long time. What do you emphasize in explaining it? Does it reflect conscious choice?

GG: While they express frustration with the deadlock in Washington that split government produces, in fact voters like the idea of having the executive and legislature controlled by different parties. Today voters are more concerned about the excesses of governmental action than they are about the inadequacies of governmental action. So they welcome the checks and balances. This feeling really took root during the Reagan administration. Voters disagreed with Reagan on a lot of domestic issues, and very much liked the fact that the Democrats were there to stop the excesses. But they liked a lot of what Reagan was doing in foreign affairs, and that he could check the Democrats on some tax and spending issues as well. So the bottom line is that voters do feel comfortable with split government. Right now, though, the pressure on divided government is much less on the Democrats for blocking George Bush, because they clearly are not, but on George Bush for becoming an obstacle to things which need to be done in the domestic social agenda. The pressure is more on the presidency than on the Congress.

Geoffrey Garin is president of the Garin-Hart Strategic Research Group