

John Kerry for President

Senator John Kerry goes toward the election with a base that is built more on opposition to George W. Bush than loyalty to his own candidacy. But over the last year we have come to know Mr. Kerry as more than just an alternative to the status quo. We like what we've seen. He has qualities that could be the basis for a great chief executive, not just a modest improvement on the incumbent.

We have been impressed with Mr. Kerry's wide knowledge and clear thinking — something that became more apparent once he was reined in by that two-minute debate light. He is blessedly willing to re-evaluate decisions when conditions change. And while Mr. Kerry's service in Vietnam was first over-promoted and then over-pilloried, his entire life has been devoted to public service, from the war to a series of elected offices. He strikes us, above all, as a man with a strong moral core.

There is no denying that this race is mainly about Mr. Bush's disastrous tenure. Nearly four years ago, after the Supreme Court awarded him the presidency, Mr. Bush came into office amid popular expectation that he would acknowledge his lack of a mandate by sticking close to the center. Instead, he turned the government over to the radical right.

Mr. Bush installed John Ashcroft, a favorite of the far right with a history of insensitivity to civil liberties, as attorney general. He sent the Senate one ideological, activist judicial nominee after another. He moved quickly to implement a far-reaching anti-choice agenda including censorship of government Web sites and a clampdown on embryonic stem cell research. He threw the government's weight against efforts by the University of Michigan to give minority students an edge in admission, as it did for students from rural areas or the offspring of alumni.

When the nation fell into recession, the president remained fixated not on generating jobs but rather on fighting the right wing's war against taxing the wealthy. As a result, money that could have been used to strengthen Social Security evaporated, as did the chance to provide adequate funding for programs the president himself had backed. No Child Left Behind, his signature domestic program, imposed higher standards on local school systems without providing enough money to meet them.

If Mr. Bush had wanted to make a mark on an issue on which Republicans and Democrats have long made common cause, he could have picked the environment. Christie Whitman, the former New Jersey governor chosen to run the Environmental Protection Agency, came from that bipartisan tradition. Yet she left after three years of futile struggle against the ideologues and industry lobbyists Mr. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney had installed in every other important environmental post. The result has been a systematic weakening of regulatory safeguards across the entire spectrum of environmental issues, from clean air to wilderness protection.

The president who lost the popular vote got a real mandate on Sept. 11, 2001. With the grieving country united behind him, Mr. Bush had an unparalleled opportunity to ask for almost any shared sacrifice. The only limit was his imagination.

He asked for another tax cut and the war against Iraq.

The president's refusal to drop his tax-cutting agenda when the nation was gearing up for war is perhaps the most shocking example of his inability to change his priorities in the face of drastically altered circumstances. Mr. Bush did not just starve the government of the money it needed for his own education initiative or the Medicare drug bill. He also made tax cuts a higher priority than doing what was needed for America's security; 90 percent of the cargo unloaded every day in the nation's ports still goes uninspected.

Along with the invasion of Afghanistan, which had near unanimous international and domestic support, Mr. Bush and his attorney general put in place a strategy for a domestic antiterror war that had all the hallmarks of the administration's normal method of doing business: a Nixonian obsession with secrecy, disrespect for civil liberties and inept management.

American citizens were detained for long periods without access to lawyers or family members. Immigrants were rounded up and forced to languish in what the Justice Department's own inspector general found were often "unduly harsh" conditions. Men captured in the Afghan war were held incommunicado with no right to challenge their confinement. The Justice Department became a cheerleader for skirting decades-old international laws and treaties forbidding the brutal treatment of prisoners taken during wartime.

Mr. Ashcroft appeared on TV time and again to announce sensational arrests of people who turned out to be either innocent, harmless braggarts or extremely low-level sympathizers of Osama bin Laden who, while perhaps wishing to do something terrible, lacked the means. The Justice Department cannot claim one major successful terrorism prosecution, and has squandered much of the trust and patience the American people freely gave in 2001. Oth-

er nations, perceiving that the vast bulk of the prisoners held for so long at Guantánamo Bay came from the same line of ineffectual incompetents or unlucky innocents, and seeing the awful photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, were shocked that the nation that was supposed to be setting the world standard for human rights could behave that way.

Like the tax cuts, Mr. Bush's obsession with Saddam Hussein seemed closer to zealotry than mere policy. He sold the war to the American people, and to Congress, as an antiterrorist campaign even though Iraq had no known working relationship with Al Qaeda. His most frightening allegation was that Saddam Hussein was close to getting nuclear weapons. It was based on two pieces of evidence. One was a story about attempts to purchase critical materials from Niger, and it was the product of rumor and forgery. The other evidence, the purchase of aluminum tubes that the administration said were meant for a nuclear centrifuge, was concocted by one low-level analyst and had been thoroughly debunked by administration investigators and international vetting. Top members of the administration knew this, but the selling went on anyway. None of the president's chief advisers have ever been held accountable for their misrepresentations to the American people or for their mismanagement of the war that followed.

The international outrage over the American invasion is now joined by a sense of disdain for the incompetence of the effort. Moderate Arab leaders who have attempted to introduce a modicum of democracy are tainted by their connection to an administration that is now radioactive in the Muslim world. Heads of rogue states, including Iran and North Korea, have been taught decisively that the best protection against a pre-emptive American strike is to acquire nuclear weapons themselves.

We have specific fears about what would happen in a second Bush term, particularly regarding the Supreme Court. The record so far gives us plenty of cause for worry. Thanks to Mr. Bush, Jay Bybee, the author of an infamous Justice Department memo justifying the use of torture as an interrogation technique, is now a federal appeals court judge. Another Bush selection, J. Leon Holmes, a federal judge in Arkansas, has written that wives must be subordinate to their husbands and compared abortion rights activists to Nazis.

Mr. Bush remains enamored of tax cuts but he has never stopped Republican lawmakers from passing massive spending, even for projects he dislikes, like increased farm aid.

If he wins re-election, domestic and foreign financial markets will know the fiscal recklessness will continue. Along with record trade imbalances, that increases the chances of a financial crisis, like an uncontrolled decline of the dollar, and higher long-term interest rates.

The Bush White House has always given us the worst aspects of the American right without any of the advantages. We get the radical goals but not the efficient management. The Department of Education's handling of the No Child Left Behind Act has been heavily politicized and inept. The Department of Homeland Security is famous for its useless alerts and its inability to distribute antiterrorism aid according to actual threats. Without providing enough troops to properly secure Iraq, the administration has managed to so strain the resources of our armed forces that the nation is unprepared to respond to a crisis anywhere else in the world.

Mr. Kerry has the capacity to do far, far better. He has a willingness — sorely missing in Washington these days — to reach across the aisle. We are relieved that he is a strong defender of civil rights, that he would remove unnecessary restrictions on stem cell research and that he understands the concept of separation of church and state. We appreciate his sensible plan to provide health coverage for most of the people who currently do without.

Mr. Kerry has an aggressive and in some cases innovative package of ideas about energy, aimed at addressing global warming and oil dependency. He is a longtime advocate of deficit reduction. In the Senate, he worked with John McCain in restoring relations between the United States and Vietnam, and led investigations of the way the international financial system has been gamed to permit the laundering of drug and terror money. He has always understood that America's appropriate role in world affairs is as leader of a willing community of nations, not in my-way-or-the-highway domination.

We look back on the past four years with hearts nearly breaking, both for the lives unnecessarily lost and for the opportunities so casually wasted. Time and again, history invited George W. Bush to play a heroic role, and time and again he chose the wrong course. We believe that with John Kerry as president, the nation will do better.

Voting for president is a leap of faith. A candidate can explain his positions in minute detail and wind up governing with a hostile Congress that refuses to let him deliver. A disaster can upend the best-laid plans. All citizens can do is mix guesswork and hope, examining what the candidates have done in the past, their apparent priorities and their general character. It's on those three grounds that we enthusiastically endorse John Kerry for president.

An endorsement of Senator Charles Schumer for re-election to the Senate appears today in the City, Long Island and Westchester weekly sections.