

A Father-Son Bond Played Out Before the World

Crisis Highlights Links Between Presidents Bush

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They sat close yesterday in the front pew of the National Cathedral, father and son, linked by bloodline, by history and now by fate, one who successfully carried out Operation Desert Storm 11 years ago, the other now preparing for what could be the most extensive military operation since that war.

"The commitment of our fathers is now the calling of our time," President Bush said from the pulpit as he sought to comfort a grieving people and rally the nation for conflict ahead. He was speaking of the Founding Fathers, but there was also an unmistakable sense of continuity with his own father, events linking one administration that fought a ruthless dictator in the Middle East to another now determined to eliminate the terrorism whose roots lie in that region.

In a sense, the war his father fought has been a constant presence in Bush's administration, if for no other reason than the national security team he assembled, which includes several of the architects of the Gulf War. On his first trip to Washington as president-elect, Bush received a Blair House briefing from Vice President-elect Cheney and Colin L. Powell, his choice for secretary of state. The subject: lessons learned from Desert Storm.

One of the things Bush was told in that briefing is that in times of crisis, initial information is frequently wrong. White House counselor Karen P. Hughes said she recalled that warning throughout the chaotic first hours after hijacked airplanes smashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as administration officials in the White House situation room sifted through conflicting reports about the number of airplanes still in U.S. airspace, weighing whether the president should return to Washington.

After news of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center reached the traveling White House party, there was hope that it might



President Bush greets New York City Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, left, and New York Gov. George E. Pataki, right, at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey.

have been a tragic accident. When the report arrived of a second plane hitting the second tower, Bush told his aides, "We're at war." Later in the day, returning to the White House aboard Marine One, with the smoldering Pentagon beneath him, Bush looked down, then turned to others on the helicopter. "You're looking at the face of war in the 21st century," he said.

"He has a clarity of what's ahead," said senior adviser Karl Rove. "It's been clear that what's in his mind is a process that is unfolding in a certain way."

There are any number of parallels between Bush and his father during these times of crisis, from the circle of advisers common to both men to the astronomical approval ratings each achieved—91 percent at his peak for former president Bush, 86 percent already for the current president in a Washington Post-ABC News poll conducted Thursday night.

Like the current president,

Bush's father was embroiled in a budget fight with Democrats in Congress when Iraq invaded Kuwait, and there were fears about the economy slipping into a recession—which it later did, costing the elder Bush his job in 1992.

Bush's father also faced questions about his capacity to lead. In the days immediately after the Iraqi invasion, one critic said the president looked like someone "bobbing in the water in a small rowboat"—although the remark was aimed less at Bush's handling of the impending military crisis and more at his overall style of leadership. Even Margaret Thatcher, then the British prime minister, privately told Bush not to "go wobbly" in the face of Saddam Hussein's threat.

The military response to the Iraqi invasion was clear in comparison with the options the younger Bush must consider in launching a war against international terrorism. Cheney, Powell and others devised a conventional military plan

to drive Hussein's forces out of Kuwait. They and the other members of Bush's team have a vastly more complicated job ahead in fashioning the kind of warfare they are talking about.

But Bush has fewer diplomatic and political hurdles than his father. The elder Bush worked for months to build an international coalition behind the invasion of Iraq and struggled to win congressional approval authorizing the use of force just days before the war was to begin.

The current president already has made a substantial start on building an international coalition, beginning with the NATO resolution Wednesday interpreting the attack on the United States as an attack on all NATO countries, and even strong verbal support from Pakistan, which could be extraordinarily helpful if the administration concludes that Afghanistan is harboring the terrorists responsible.

Much more work is required as

U.S. officials determine exactly what kind of military, intelligence, financial or other support they may request from other nations, but Bush is far ahead of where his father was at this point.

Similarly, Congress has demonstrated near unanimous bipartisan support for Bush on the question of military retaliation. "We didn't get the votes in Congress until we had in effect marshaled the support of the rest of the world," one veteran of the first Bush administration said.

The reasons for the levels of international and domestic support are obvious, reflecting a hawkish public mood in the wake of Tuesday's attacks that left thousands of American civilians dead.

The Post-ABC News poll taken Thursday night found that 86 percent of those surveyed believed the United States would go to war and 86 percent of those surveyed said they were prepared to do so to combat terrorism.

When pressed about the costs of

war, 69 percent said they supported military action even if the conflict cost the lives of large numbers of U.S. troops, and 77 percent said they supported it even if it meant the loss of innocent civilian lives in foreign countries.

In contrast, in a Post-ABC News poll taken days after the Iraqi invasion in August 1990, 68 percent of those surveyed said they opposed invading Iraq to force the Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait.

Perhaps the greatest difference is the preparation Bush and his father had for their respective challenges. The elder Bush, a committed internationalist, was steeped in foreign policy and literally speed-dialed his way around the globe building support among other heads of state. The current president, who had no significant foreign policy experience before he was elected and whose actions have prompted criticism from abroad about a new American unilateralism, must try to rally the world for an even more complicated military campaign.

How much Bush is in contact with his father during this crisis is not known, but there is little doubt that it is more frequent than the White House acknowledges. Administration allies say the strength of that relationship is valuable at a time like this.

"This president is secure enough in who he is and in his belief in himself that it's not running to his father to say, 'What do I do now?'" Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) said. "George W. Bush is a pretty secure guy, and he's smart in the sense that he will take his father's counsel. He may agree with it or he may not."

Bush's eloquence yesterday may have surpassed what his father demonstrated during his public speeches during the Gulf War, his rhetoric no less determined that his father's famous "This will not stand" statement at the beginning of that crisis.

"This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others," Bush said yesterday. "It will end in a way, and at an hour, of our choosing."

He closed his folder and walked deliberately back to his seat with the rest of the audience. His father reached across first lady Laura Bush and silently gave his son a squeeze on the arm. It was a gesture signifying a bond unique in the nation's history.

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