Without a Doubt

By RON SUSKIND

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Bruce Bartlett, a domestic policy adviser to Ronald Reagan and a treasury official for the first President Bush, told me recently that "if Bush wins, there will be a civil war in the Republican Party starting on Nov. 3." The nature of that conflict, as Bartlett sees it? Essentially, the same as the one raging across much of the world: a battle between modernists and fundamentalists, pragmatists and true believers, reason and religion.

Kevin LaMarque/Reuters

"Just in the past few months," Bartlett said, "I think a light has gone off for people who've spent time up close to Bush: that this instinct he's always talking about is this sort of weird, Messianic idea of what he thinks God has told him to do." Bartlett, a 53-year-old columnist and self-described libertarian Republican who has lately been a champion for traditional Republicans concerned about Bush's governance, went on to say: "This is why George W. Bush is so clear-eyed about Al Qaeda and the Islamic fundamentalist enemy. He believes you have to kill them all. They can't be persuaded, that they're extremists, driven by a dark vision. He understands them, because he's just like them. . . .

"This is why he dispenses with people who confront him with inconvenient facts," Bartlett went on to say. "He truly believes he's on a mission from God. Absolute

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faith like that overwhelms a need for analysis. The whole thing about faith is to believe things for which there is no empirical evidence." Bartlett paused, then said, "But you can't run the world on faith."

Forty democratic senators were gathered for a lunch in March just off the Senate floor. I was there as a guest speaker. Joe Biden was telling a story, a story about the president. "I was in the Oval Office a few months after we swept into Baghdad," he began, "and I was telling the president of my many concerns" -- concerns about growing problems winning the peace, the explosive mix of Shiite and Sunni, the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and problems securing the oil fields. Bush, Biden recalled, just looked at him, unflappably sure that the United States was on the right course and that all was well. "'Mr. President,' I finally said, 'How can you be so sure when you know you don't know the facts?'"

Biden said that Bush stood up and put his hand on the senator's shoulder. "My instincts," he said. "My instincts."

Biden paused and shook his head, recalling it all as the room grew quiet. "I said, 'Mr. President, your instincts aren't good enough!'"

The democrat Biden and the Republican Bartlett are trying to make sense of the same thing -- a president who has been an extraordinary blend of forcefulness and inscrutability, opacity and action.

But lately, words and deeds are beginning to connect.

The Delaware senator was, in fact, hearing what Bush's top deputies -- from cabinet members like Paul O'Neill, Christine Todd Whitman and Colin Powell to generals fighting in Iraq -- have been told for years when they requested explanations for many of the president's decisions, policies that often seemed to collide with accepted facts. The president would say that he relied on his "gut" or his "instinct" to guide the ship of state, and then he "prayed over it." The old pro Bartlett, a deliberative, fact-based wonk, is finally hearing a tune that has been hummed quietly by evangelicals (so as not to trouble the secular) for years as they gazed upon President George W. Bush. This evangelical group -- the core of the energetic "base" that may well usher Bush to victory -- believes that their leader is a messenger from God. And in the first presidential debate, many Americans heard the discursive John Kerry succinctly raise, for the first time, the issue of Bush's certainty -- the issue being, as Kerry put it, that "you can be certain and be wrong."

What underlies Bush's certainty? And can it be assessed in the temporal realm of informed consent?

All of this -- the "gut" and "instincts," the certainty and religiosity - connects to a single word, "faith," and faith asserts its hold ever more

on debates in this country and abroad. That a deep Christian faith illuminated the personal journey of George W. Bush is common knowledge. But faith has also shaped his presidency in profound, nonreligious ways. The president has demanded unquestioning faith from his followers, his staff, his senior aides and his kindred in the Republican Party. Once he makes a decision -- often swiftly, based on a creed or moral position -- he expects complete faith in its rightness.

The disdainful smirks and grimaces that many viewers were surprised to see in the first presidential debate are familiar expressions to those in the administration or in Congress who have simply asked the president to explain his positions. Since 9/11, those requests have grown scarce; Bush's intolerance of doubters has, if anything, increased, and few dare to question him now. A writ of infallibility -- a premise beneath the powerful Bushian certainty that has, in many ways, moved mountains -- is not just for public consumption: it has guided the inner life of the White House. As Whitman told me on the day in May 2003 that she announced her resignation as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency: "In meetings, I'd ask if there were any facts to support our case. And for that, I was accused of disloyalty!" (Whitman, whose faith in Bush has since been renewed, denies making these remarks and is now a leader of the president's re-election effort in New Jersey.)

The nation's founders, smarting still from the punitive pieties of Europe's state religions, were adamant about erecting a wall between organized religion and political authority. But suddenly, that seems like a long time ago. George W. Bush -- both captive and creator of this moment -- has steadily, inexorably, changed the office itself. He has created the faith-based presidency.

The faith-based presidency is a with-us-or-against-us model that has been enormously effective at, among other things, keeping the workings and temperament of the Bush White House a kind of state secret. The dome of silence cracked a bit in the late winter and spring, with revelations from the former counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke and also, in my book, from the former Bush treasury secretary Paul O'Neill. When I quoted O'Neill saying that Bush was like "a blind man in a room full of deaf people," this did not endear me to the White House. But my phone did begin to ring, with Democrats and Republicans calling with similar impressions and anecdotes about Bush's faith and certainty. These are among the sources I relied upon for this article. Few were willing to talk on the record. Some were willing to talk because they said they thought George W. Bush might lose; others, out of fear of what might transpire if he wins. In either case, there seems to be a growing silence fatigue -- public servants, some with vast experience, who feel they have spent years being treated like Victorian-era children, seen but not heard, and are tired of it. But silence still reigns in the highest reaches of the White House. After many requests, Dan Bartlett, the White House communications director, said in a letter that the president and those around him would not be cooperating with this article in any way.

Some officials, elected or otherwise, with whom I have spoken with left meetings in the Oval Office concerned that the president was struggling with the demands of the job. Others focused on Bush's substantial interpersonal gifts as a compensation for his perceived lack

of broader capabilities. Still others, like Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, a Democrat, are worried about something other than his native intelligence. "He's plenty smart enough to do the job," Levin said. "It's his lack of curiosity about complex issues which troubles me." But more than anything else, I heard expressions of awe at the president's preternatural certainty and wonderment about its source.

There is one story about Bush's particular brand of certainty I am able to piece together and tell for the record.

In the Oval Office in December 2002, the president met with a few ranking senators and members of the House, both Republicans and Democrats. In those days, there were high hopes that the United States-sponsored "road map" for the Israelis and Palestinians would be a pathway to peace, and the discussion that wintry day was, in part, about countries providing peacekeeping forces in the region. The problem, everyone agreed, was that a number of European countries, like France and Germany, had armies that were not trusted by either the Israelis or Palestinians. One congressman -- the Hungarian-born Tom Lantos, a Democrat from California and the only Holocaust survivor in Congress -- mentioned that the Scandinavian countries were viewed more positively. Lantos went on to describe for the president how the Swedish Army might be an ideal candidate to anchor a small peacekeeping force on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Sweden has a well-trained force of about 25,000. The president looked at him appraisingly, several people in the room recall.

"I don't know why you're talking about Sweden," Bush said. "They're the neutral one. They don't have an army."

Lantos paused, a little shocked, and offered a gentlemanly reply: "Mr. President, you may have thought that I said Switzerland. They're the ones that are historically neutral, without an army." Then Lantos mentioned, in a gracious aside, that the Swiss do have a tough national guard to protect the country in the event of invasion.

Bush held to his view. "No, no, it's Sweden that has no army."

The room went silent, until someone changed the subject.

A few weeks later, members of Congress and their spouses gathered with administration officials and other dignitaries for the White House Christmas party. The president saw Lantos and grabbed him by the shoulder. "You were right," he said, with bonhomie. "Sweden does have an army."

This story was told to me by one of the senators in the Oval Office that December day, Joe Biden. Lantos, a liberal Democrat, would not comment about it. In general, people who meet with Bush will not discuss their encounters. (Lantos, through a spokesman, says it is a longstanding policy of his not to discuss Oval Office meetings.)

This is one key feature of the faith-based presidency: open dialogue, based on facts, is not seen as something of inherent value. It may, in fact, create doubt, which undercuts faith. It could result in a loss of confidence in the decision-maker and, just as important, by the

decision-maker. Nothing could be more vital, whether staying on message with the voters or the terrorists or a California congressman in a meeting about one of the world's most nagging problems. As Bush himself has said any number of times on the campaign trail, "By remaining resolute and firm and strong, this world will be peaceful."

He didn't always talk this way. A precious glimpse of Bush, just as he was ascending to the presidency, comes from Jim Wallis, a man with the added advantage of having deep acuity about the struggles between fact and faith. Wallis, an evangelical pastor who for 30 years has run the Sojourners -- a progressive organization of advocates for social justice -- was asked during the transition to help pull together a diverse group of members of the clergy to talk about faith and poverty with the new president-elect.

In December 2000, Bush sat in the classroom of a Baptist church in Austin, Tex., with 30 or so clergy members and asked, "How do I speak to the soul of the nation?" He listened as each guest articulated a vision of what might be. The afternoon hours passed. No one wanted to leave. People rose from their chairs and wandered the room, huddling in groups, conversing passionately. In one cluster, Bush and Wallis talked of their journeys.

"I've never lived around poor people," Wallis remembers Bush saying. "I don't know what they think. I really don't know what they think. I'm a white Republican guy who doesn't get it. How do I get it?"

Wallis recalls replying, "You need to listen to the poor and those who live and work with poor people."

Bush called over his speechwriter, Michael Gerson, and said, "I want you to hear this." A month later, an almost identical line -- "many in our country do not know the pain of poverty, but we can listen to those who do" -- ended up in the inaugural address.

That was an earlier Bush, one rather more open and conversant, matching his impulsiveness with a can-do attitude and seemingly unafraid of engaging with a diverse group. The president has an array of interpersonal gifts that fit well with this fearlessness -- a headlong, unalloyed quality, best suited to ranging among different types of people, searching for the outlines of what will take shape as principles.

Yet this strong suit, an improvisational gift, has long been forced to wrestle with its "left brain" opposite -- a struggle, across 30 years, with the critical and analytical skills so prized in America's professional class. In terms of intellectual faculties, that has been the ongoing battle for this talented man, first visible during the lackluster years at Yale and five years of drift through his 20's -- a time when peers were busy building credentials in law, business or medicine.

Biden, who early on became disenchanted with Bush's grasp of foreign-policy issues and is among John Kerry's closest Senate friends, has spent a lot of time trying to size up the president. "Most successful people are good at identifying, very early, their strengths and weaknesses, at knowing themselves," he told me not long ago.

"For most of us average Joes, that meant we've relied on strengths but had to work on our weakness -- to lift them to adequacy -- otherwise they might bring us down. I don't think the president really had to do that, because he always had someone there -- his family or friends -- to bail him out. I don't think, on balance, that has served him well for the moment he's in now as president. He never seems to have worked on his weaknesses."

Bush has been called the C.E.O. president, but that's just a catch phrase -- he never ran anything of consequence in the private sector. The M.B.A. president would be more accurate: he did, after all, graduate from Harvard Business School. And some who have worked under him in the White House and know about business have spotted a strange business-school time warp. It's as if a 1975 graduate from H.B.S. -- one who had little chance to season theory with practice during the past few decades of change in corporate America -- has simply been dropped into the most challenging management job in the world.

One aspect of the H.B.S. method, with its emphasis on problems of actual corporations, is sometimes referred to as the "case cracker" problem. The case studies are static, generally a snapshot of a troubled company, frozen in time; the various "solutions" students proffer, and then defend in class against tough questioning, tend to have very short shelf lives. They promote rigidity, inappropriate surety. This is something H.B.S. graduates, most of whom land at large or midsize firms, learn in their first few years in business. They discover, often to their surprise, that the world is dynamic, it flows and changes, often for no good reason. The key is flexibility, rather than sticking to your guns in a debate, and constant reassessment of shifting realities. In short, thoughtful second-guessing.

George W. Bush, who went off to Texas to be an oil wildcatter, never had a chance to learn these lessons about the power of nuanced, fact-based analysis. The small oil companies he ran tended to lose money; much of their value was as tax shelters. (The investors were often friends of his father's.) Later, with the Texas Rangers baseball team, he would act as an able front man but never really as a boss.

Instead of learning the limitations of his Harvard training, what George W. Bush learned instead during these fitful years were lessons about faith and its particular efficacy. It was in 1985, around the time of his 39th birthday, George W. Bush says, that his life took a sharp turn toward salvation. At that point he was drinking, his marriage was on the rocks, his career was listless. Several accounts have emerged from those close to Bush about a faith "intervention" of sorts at the Kennebunkport family compound that year. Details vary, but here's the gist of what I understand took place. George W., drunk at a party, crudely insulted a friend of his mother's. George senior and Barbara blew up. Words were exchanged along the lines of something having to be done. George senior, then the vice president, dialed up his friend, Billy Graham, who came to the compound and spent several days with George W. in probing exchanges and walks on the beach. George W. was soon born again. He stopped drinking, attended Bible study and wrestled with issues of fervent faith. A man who was lost was saved.

His marriage may have been repaired by the power of faith, but faith

was clearly having little impact on his broken career. Faith heals the heart and the spirit, but it doesn't do much for analytical skills. In 1990, a few years after receiving salvation, Bush was still bumping along. Much is apparent from one of the few instances of disinterested testimony to come from this period. It is the voice of David Rubenstein, managing director and cofounder of the Carlyle Group, the Washington-based investment firm that is one of the town's most powerful institutions and a longtime business home for the president's father. In 1989, the catering division of Marriott was taken private and established as Caterair by a group of Carlyle investors. Several old-guard Republicans, including the former Nixon aide Fred Malek, were involved.

Rubenstein described that time to a convention of pension managers in Los Angeles last year, recalling that Malek approached him and said: "There is a guy who would like to be on the board. He's kind of down on his luck a bit. Needs a job. . . . Needs some board positions." Though Rubenstein didn't think George W. Bush, then in his mid-40's, "added much value," he put him on the Caterair board. "Came to all the meetings," Rubenstein told the conventioneers. "Told a lot of jokes. Not that many clean ones. And after a while I kind of said to him, after about three years: 'You know, I'm not sure this is really for you. Maybe you should do something else. Because I don't think you're adding that much value to the board. You don't know that much about the company.' He said: 'Well, I think I'm getting out of this business anyway. And I don't really like it that much. So I'm probably going to resign from the board.' And I said thanks. Didn't think I'd ever see him again."

Bush would soon officially resign from Caterair's board. Around this time, Karl Rove set up meetings to discuss Bush's possible candidacy for the governorship of Texas. Six years after that, he was elected leader of the free world and began "case cracking" on a dizzying array of subjects, proffering his various solutions, in both foreign and domestic affairs. But the pointed "defend your position" queries -- so central to the H.B.S. method and rigorous analysis of all kinds -- were infrequent. Questioning a regional supervisor or V.P. for planning is one thing. Questioning the president of the United States is another.

Still, some couldn't resist. As I reported in "The Price of Loyalty," at the Bush administration's first National Security Council meeting, Bush asked if anyone had ever met Ariel Sharon. Some were uncertain if it was a joke. It wasn't: Bush launched into a riff about briefly meeting Sharon two years before, how he wouldn't "go by past reputations when it comes to Sharon. . . . I'm going to take him at face value," and how the United States should pull out of the Arab-Israeli conflict because "I don't see much we can do over there at this point." Colin Powell, for one, seemed startled. This would reverse 30 years of policy -- since the Nixon administration -- of American engagement. Such a move would unleash Sharon, Powell countered, and tear the delicate fabric of the Mideast in ways that might be irreparable. Bush brushed aside Powell's concerns impatiently. "Sometimes a show of force by one side can really clarify things."

Such challenges -- from either Powell or his opposite number as the top official in domestic policy, Paul O'Neill -- were trials that Bush

had less and less patience for as the months passed. He made that clear to his top lieutenants. Gradually, Bush lost what Richard Perle, who would later head a largely private-sector group under Bush called the Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee, had described as his open posture during foreign-policy tutorials prior to the 2000 campaign. ("He had the confidence to ask questions that revealed he didn't know very much," Perle said.) By midyear 2001, a stand-and-deliver rhythm was established. Meetings, large and small, started to take on a scripted quality. Even then, the circle around Bush was tightening. Top officials, from cabinet members on down, were often told when they would speak in Bush's presence, for how long and on what topic. The president would listen without betraying any reaction. Sometimes there would be cross-discussions -- Powell and Rumsfeld, for instance, briefly parrying on an issue -- but the president would rarely prod anyone with direct, informed questions.

Each administration, over the course of a term, is steadily shaped by its president, by his character, personality and priorities. It is a process that unfolds on many levels. There are, of course, a chief executive's policies, which are executed by a staff and attending bureaucracies. But a few months along, officials, top to bottom, will also start to adopt the boss's phraseology, his presumptions, his rhythms. If a president fishes, people buy poles; if he expresses displeasure, aides get busy finding evidence to support the judgment. A staff channels the leader.

A cluster of particularly vivid qualities was shaping George W. Bush's White House through the summer of 2001: a disdain for contemplation or deliberation, an embrace of decisiveness, a retreat from empiricism, a sometimes bullying impatience with doubters and even friendly questioners. Already Bush was saying, Have faith in me and my decisions, and you'll be rewarded. All through the White House, people were channeling the boss. He didn't second-guess himself; why should they?

Considering the trials that were soon to arrive, it is easy to overlook what a difficult time this must have been for George W. Bush. For nearly three decades, he had sat in classrooms, and then at mahogany tables in corporate suites, with little to contribute. Then, as governor of Texas, he was graced with a pliable enough bipartisan Legislature, and the Legislature is where the real work in that state's governance gets done. The Texas Legislature's tension of opposites offered the structure of point and counterpoint, which Bush could navigate effectively with his strong, improvisational skills.

But the mahogany tables were now in the Situation Room and in the large conference room adjacent to the Oval Office. He guided a ruling party. Every issue that entered that rarefied sanctum required a complex decision, demanding focus, thoroughness and analytical potency.

For the president, as Biden said, to be acutely aware of his weaknesses -- and to have to worry about revealing uncertainty or need or confusion, even to senior officials -- must have presented an untenable bind. By summer's end that first year, Vice President Dick Cheney had stopped talking in meetings he attended with Bush. They would talk

privately, or at their weekly lunch. The president was spending a lot of time outside the White House, often at the ranch, in the presence of only the most trustworthy confidants. The circle around Bush is the tightest around any president in the modern era, and "it's both exclusive and exclusionary," Christopher DeMuth, president of the American Enterprise Institute, the neoconservative policy group, told me. "It's a too tightly managed decision-making process. When they make decisions, a very small number of people are in the room, and it has a certain effect of constricting the range of alternatives being offered."

On Sept. 11, 2001, the country watched intently to see if and how Bush would lead. After a couple of days in which he seemed shaky and uncertain, he emerged, and the moment he began to lead -- standing on the World Trade Center's rubble with a bullhorn -- for much of America, any lingering doubts about his abilities vanished. No one could afford doubt, not then. They wanted action, and George W. Bush was ready, having never felt the reasonable hesitations that slowed more deliberative men, and many presidents, including his father.

Within a few days of the attacks, Bush decided on the invasion of Afghanistan and was barking orders. His speech to the joint session of Congress on Sept. 20 will most likely be the greatest of his presidency. He prayed for God's help. And many Americans, of all faiths, prayed with him -- or for him. It was simple and nondenominational: a prayer that he'd be up to this moment, so that he -- and, by extension, we as a country -- would triumph in that dark hour.

This is where the faith-based presidency truly takes shape. Faith, which for months had been coloring the decision-making process and a host of political tactics -- think of his address to the nation on stem-cell research -- now began to guide events. It was the most natural ascension: George W. Bush turning to faith in his darkest moment and discovering a wellspring of power and confidence.

Of course, the mandates of sound, sober analysis didn't vanish. They never do. Ask any entrepreneur with a blazing idea when, a few years along, the first debt payments start coming due. Or the C.E.O., certain that a high stock price affirms his sweeping vision, until that neglected, flagging division cripples the company. There's a startled look -- how'd that happen? In this case, the challenge of mobilizing the various agencies of the United States government and making certain that agreed-upon goals become demonstrable outcomes grew exponentially.

Looking back at the months directly following 9/11, virtually every leading military analyst seems to believe that rather than using Afghan proxies, we should have used more American troops, deployed more quickly, to pursue Osama bin Laden in the mountains of Tora Bora. Many have also been critical of the president's handling of Saudi Arabia, home to 15 of the 19 hijackers; despite Bush's setting goals in the so-called "financial war on terror," the Saudis failed to cooperate with American officials in hunting for the financial sources of terror. Still, the nation wanted bold action and was delighted to get it. Bush's

approval rating approached 90 percent. Meanwhile, the executive's balance between analysis and resolution, between contemplation and action, was being tipped by the pull of righteous faith.

It was during a press conference on Sept. 16, in response to a question about homeland security efforts infringing on civil rights, that Bush first used the telltale word "crusade" in public. "This is a new kind of -- a new kind of evil," he said. "And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while."

Muslims around the world were incensed. Two days later, Ari Fleischer tried to perform damage control. "I think what the president was saying was -- had no intended consequences for anybody, Muslim or otherwise, other than to say that this is a broad cause that he is calling on America and the nations around the world to join." As to "any connotations that would upset any of our partners, or anybody else in the world, the president would regret if anything like that was conveyed."

A few months later, on Feb. 1, 2002, Jim Wallis of the Sojourners stood in the Roosevelt Room for the introduction of Jim Towey as head of the president's faith-based and community initiative. John DiIulio, the original head, had left the job feeling that the initiative was not about "compassionate conservatism," as originally promised, but rather a political giveaway to the Christian right, a way to consolidate and energize that part of the base.

Moments after the ceremony, Bush saw Wallis. He bounded over and grabbed the cheeks of his face, one in each hand, and squeezed. "Jim, how ya doin', how ya doin'!" he exclaimed. Wallis was taken aback. Bush excitedly said that his massage therapist had given him Wallis's book, "Faith Works." His joy at seeing Wallis, as Wallis and others remember it, was palpable -- a president, wrestling with faith and its role at a time of peril, seeing that rare bird: an independent counselor. Wallis recalls telling Bush he was doing fine, '"but in the State of the Union address a few days before, you said that unless we devote all our energies, our focus, our resources on this war on terrorism, we're going to lose.' I said, 'Mr. President, if we don't devote our energy, our focus and our time on also overcoming global poverty and desperation, we will lose not only the war on poverty, but we'll lose the war on terrorism.'"

Bush replied that that was why America needed the leadership of Wallis and other members of the clergy.

"No, Mr. President," Wallis says he told Bush, "We need your leadership on this question, and all of us will then commit to support you. Unless we drain the swamp of injustice in which the mosquitoes of terrorism breed, we'll never defeat the threat of terrorism."

Bush looked quizzically at the minister, Wallis recalls. They never spoke again after that.

"When I was first with Bush in Austin, what I saw was a self-help Methodist, very open, seeking," Wallis says now. "What I started to

see at this point was the man that would emerge over the next year -- a messianic American Calvinist. He doesn't want to hear from anyone who doubts him."

But with a country crying out for intrepid leadership, does a president have time to entertain doubters? In a speech in Alaska two weeks later, Bush again referred to the war on terror as a "crusade."

In the summer of 2002, after I had written an article in Esquire that the White House didn't like about Bush's former communications director, Karen Hughes, I had a meeting with a senior adviser to Bush. He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then he told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend -- but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency.

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

Who besides guys like me are part of the reality-based community? Many of the other elected officials in Washington, it would seem. A group of Democratic and Republican members of Congress were called in to discuss Iraq sometime before the October 2002 vote authorizing Bush to move forward. A Republican senator recently told Time Magazine that the president walked in and said: "Look, I want your vote. I'm not going to debate it with you." When one of the senators began to ask a question, Bush snapped, "Look, I'm not going to debate it with you."

The 9/11 commission did not directly address the question of whether Bush exerted influence over the intelligence community about the existence of weapons of mass destruction. That question will be investigated after the election, but if no tangible evidence of undue pressure is found, few officials or alumni of the administration whom I spoke to are likely to be surprised. "If you operate in a certain way -- by saying this is how I want to justify what I've already decided to do, and I don't care how you pull it off -- you guarantee that you'll get faulty, one-sided information," Paul O'Neill, who was asked to resign his post of treasury secretary in December 2002, said when we had dinner a few weeks ago. "You don't have to issue an edict, or twist arms, or be overt."

In a way, the president got what he wanted: a National Intelligence Estimate on W.M.D. that creatively marshaled a few thin facts, and then Colin Powell putting his credibility on the line at the United Nations in a show of faith. That was enough for George W. Bush to press forward and invade Iraq. As he told his quasi-memoirist, Bob Woodward, in "Plan of Attack": "Going into this period, I was praying for strength to do the Lord's will. . . . I'm surely not going to justify the

war based upon God. Understand that. Nevertheless, in my case, I pray to be as good a messenger of his will as possible."

Machiavelli's oft-cited line about the adequacy of the perception of power prompts a question. Is the appearance of confidence as important as its possession? Can confidence -- true confidence -- be willed? Or must it be earned?

George W. Bush, clearly, is one of history's great confidence men. That is not meant in the huckster's sense, though many critics claim that on the war in Iraq, the economy and a few other matters he has engaged in some manner of bait-and-switch. No, I mean it in the sense that he's a believer in the power of confidence. At a time when constituents are uneasy and enemies are probing for weaknesses, he clearly feels that unflinching confidence has an almost mystical power. It can all but create reality.

Whether you can run the world on faith, it's clear you can run one hell of a campaign on it.

George W. Bush and his team have constructed a high-performance electoral engine. The soul of this new machine is the support of millions of likely voters, who judge his worth based on intangibles -- character, certainty, fortitude and godliness -- rather than on what he says or does. The deeper the darkness, the brighter this filament of faith glows, a faith in the president and the just God who affirms him.

The leader of the free world is clearly comfortable with this calculus and artfully encourages it. In the series of televised, carefully choreographed "Ask President Bush" events with supporters around the country, sessions filled with prayers and blessings, one questioner recently summed up the feelings of so many Christian conservatives, the core of the Bush army. "I've voted Republican from the very first time I could vote," said Gary Walby, a retired jeweler from Destin, Fla., as he stood before the president in a crowded college gym. "And I also want to say this is the very first time that I have felt that God was in the White House." Bush simply said "thank you" as a wave of raucous applause rose from the assembled.

Every few months, a report surfaces of the president using strikingly Messianic language, only to be dismissed by the White House. Three months ago, for instance, in a private meeting with Amish farmers in Lancaster County, Pa., Bush was reported to have said, "I trust God speaks through me." In this ongoing game of winks and nods, a White House spokesman denied the president had specifically spoken those words, but noted that "his faith helps him in his service to people."

A recent Gallup Poll noted that 42 percent of Americans identify themselves as evangelical or "born again." While this group leans Republican, it includes black urban churches and is far from monolithic. But Bush clearly draws his most ardent supporters and tireless workers from this group, many from a healthy subset of approximately four million evangelicals who didn't vote in 2000 -- potential new arrivals to the voting booth who could tip a close election or push a tight contest toward a rout.

This signaling system -- forceful, national, varied, yet clean of the president's specific fingerprint -- carries enormous weight. Lincoln Chafee, the moderate Republican senator from Rhode Island, has broken with the president precisely over concerns about the nature of Bush's certainty. "This issue," he says, of Bush's "announcing that 'I carry the word of God' is the key to the election. The president wants to signal to the base with that message, but in the swing states he does not."

Come to the hustings on Labor Day and meet the base. In 2004, you know a candidate by his base, and the Bush campaign is harnessing the might of churches, with hordes of voters registering through church-sponsored programs. Following the news of Bush on his national tour in the week after the Republican convention, you could sense how a faith-based president campaigns: on a surf of prayer and righteous rage.

Righteous rage -- that's what Hardy Billington felt when he heard about same-sex marriage possibly being made legal in Massachusetts. "It made me upset and disgusted, things going on in Massachusetts," the 52-year-old from Poplar Bluff, Mo., told me. "I prayed, then I got to work." Billington spent $830 in early July to put up a billboard on the edge of town. It read: "I Support President Bush and the Men and Women Fighting for Our Country. We Invite President Bush to Visit Poplar Bluff." Soon Billington and his friend David Hahn, a fundamentalist preacher, started a petition drive. They gathered 10,000 signatures. That fact eventually reached the White House scheduling office.

By late afternoon on a cloudy Labor Day, with a crowd of more than 20,000 assembled in a public park, Billington stepped to the podium. "The largest group I ever talked to I think was seven people, and I'm not much of a talker," Billington, a shy man with three kids and a couple of dozen rental properties that he owns, told me several days later. "I've never been so frightened."

But Billington said he "looked to God" and said what was in his heart. "The United States is the greatest country in the world," he told the rally. "President Bush is the greatest president I have ever known. I love my president. I love my country. And more important, I love Jesus Christ."

The crowd went wild, and they went wild again when the president finally arrived and gave his stump speech. There were Bush's periodic stumbles and gaffes, but for the followers of the faith-based president, that was just fine. They got it -- and "it" was the faith.

And for those who don't get it? That was explained to me in late 2002 by Mark McKinnon, a longtime senior media adviser to Bush, who now runs his own consulting firm and helps the president. He started by challenging me. "You think he's an idiot, don't you?" I said, no, I didn't. "No, you do, all of you do, up and down the West Coast, the East Coast, a few blocks in southern Manhattan called Wall Street. Let me clue you in. We don't care. You see, you're outnumbered 2 to 1 by folks in the big, wide middle of America, busy working people who don't read The New York Times or Washington Post or The L.A.

Times. And you know what they like? They like the way he walks and the way he points, the way he exudes confidence. They have faith in him. And when you attack him for his malaprops, his jumbled syntax, it's good for us. Because you know what those folks don't like? They don't like you!" In this instance, the final "you," of course, meant the entire reality-based community.

The bond between Bush and his base is a bond of mutual support. He supports them with his actions, doing his level best to stand firm on wedge issues like abortion and same-sex marriage while he identifies evil in the world, at home and abroad. They respond with fierce faith. The power of this transaction is something that people, especially those who are religious, tend to connect to their own lives. If you have faith in someone, that person is filled like a vessel. Your faith is the wind beneath his or her wings. That person may well rise to the occasion and surprise you: *I had faith in you, and my faith was rewarded*. Or, *I know you've been struggling, and I need to pray harder.*

Bush's speech that day in Poplar Bluff finished with a mythic appeal: "For all Americans, these years in our history will always stand apart," he said. "You know, there are quiet times in the life of a nation when little is expected of its leaders. This isn't one of those times. This is a time that needs -- when we need firm resolve and clear vision and a deep faith in the values that make us a great nation."

The life of the nation and the life of Bush effortlessly merge -- his fortitude, even in the face of doubters, is that of the nation; his ordinariness, like theirs, is heroic; his resolve, to whatever end, will turn the wheel of history.

Remember, this is consent, informed by the heart and by the spirit. In the end, Bush doesn't have to say he's ordained by God. After a day of speeches by Hardy Billington and others, it goes without saying.

"To me, I just believe God controls everything, and God uses the president to keep evil down, to see the darkness and protect this nation," Billington told me, voicing an idea shared by millions of Bush supporters. "Other people will not protect us. God gives people choices to make. God gave us this president to be the man to protect the nation at this time."

But when the moment came in the V.I.P. tent to shake Bush's hand, Billington remembered being reserved. "'I really thank God that you're the president' was all I told him." Bush, he recalled, said, "Thank you."

"He knew what I meant," Billington said. "I believe he's an instrument of God, but I have to be careful about what I say, you know, in public."

Is there anyone in America who feels that John Kerry is an instrument of God?

"I'm going to be real positive, while I keep my foot on John Kerry's throat," George W. Bush said last month at a confidential luncheon a

block away from the White House with a hundred or so of his most ardent, longtime supporters, the so-called R.N.C. Regents. This was a high-rolling crowd -- at one time or another, they had all given large contributions to Bush or the Republican National Committee. Bush had known many of them for years, and a number of them had visited him at the ranch. It was a long way from Poplar Bluff.

The Bush these supporters heard was a triumphal Bush, actively beginning to plan his second term. It is a second term, should it come to pass, that will alter American life in many ways, if predictions that Bush voiced at the luncheon come true.

He said emphatically that he expects the Republicans will gain seats to expand their control of the House and the Senate. According to notes provided to me, and according to several guests at the lunch who agreed to speak about what they heard, he said that "Osama bin Laden would like to overthrow the Saudis . . .

then we're in trouble. Because they have a weapon. They have the oil." He said that there will be an opportunity to appoint a Supreme Court justice shortly after his inauguration, and perhaps three more high-court vacancies during his second term.

"Won't that be amazing?" said Peter Stent, a rancher and conservationist who attended the luncheon. "Can you imagine? Four appointments!"

After his remarks, Bush opened it up for questions, and someone asked what he's going to do about energy policy with worldwide oil reserves predicted to peak.

Bush said: "I'm going to push nuclear energy, drilling in Alaska and clean coal. Some nuclear-fusion technologies are interesting." He mentions energy from "processing corn."

"I'm going to bring all this up in the debate, and I'm going to push it," he said, and then tried out a line. "Do you realize that ANWR [the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge] is the size of South Carolina, and where we want to drill is the size of the Columbia airport?"

The questions came from many directions -- respectful, but clearly reality-based. About the deficits, he said he'd "spend whatever it takes to protect our kids in Iraq," that "homeland security cost more than I originally thought."

In response to a question, he talked about diversity, saying that "hands down," he has the most diverse senior staff in terms of both gender and race. He recalled a meeting with Chancellor Gerhard Schroder of Germany. "You know, I'm sitting there with Schroder one day with Colin and Condi. And I'm thinking: What's Schroder thinking?! He's sitting here with two blacks and one's a woman."

But as the hour passed, Bush kept coming back to the thing most on his mind: his second term.

"I'm going to come out strong after my swearing in," Bush said, "with fundamental tax reform, tort reform, privatizing of Social Security." The victories he expects in November, he said, will give us "two years, at least, until the next midterm. We have to move quickly, because after that I'll be quacking like a duck."

Joseph Gildenhorn, a top contributor who attended the luncheon and has been invited to visit Bush at his ranch, said later: "I've never seen the president so ebullient. He was so confident. He feels so strongly he will win." Yet one part of Bush's 60-odd-minute free-form riff gave Gildenhorn -- a board member of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and a former ambassador to Switzerland -- a moment's pause. The president, listing priorities for his second term, placed near the top of his agenda the expansion of federal support for faith-based institutions. The president talked at length about giving the initiative the full measure of his devotion and said that questions about separation of church and state were not an issue.

Talk of the faith-based initiative, Gildenhorn said, makes him "a little uneasy." Many conservative evangelicals "feel they have a direct line from God," he said, and feel Bush is divinely chosen.

"I think he's religious, I think he's a born-again, I don't think, though, that he feels that he's been ordained by God to serve the country." Gildenhorn paused, then said, "But you know, I really haven't discussed it with him."

A regent I spoke to later and who asked not to be identified told me: "I'm happy he's certain of victory and that he's ready to burst forth into his second term, but it all makes me a little nervous. There are a lot of big things that he's planning to do domestically, and who knows what countries we might invade or what might happen in Iraq. But when it gets complex, he seems to turn to prayer or God rather than digging in and thinking things through. What's that line? -- the devil's in the details. If you don't go after that devil, he'll come after you."

Bush grew into one of history's most forceful leaders, his admirers will attest, by replacing hesitation and reasonable doubt with faith and clarity. Many more will surely tap this high-voltage connection of fervent faith and bold action. In politics, the saying goes, anything that works must be repeated until it is replaced by something better. The horizon seems clear of competitors.

Can the unfinished American experiment in self-governance -- sputtering on the watery fuel of illusion and assertion -- deal with something as nuanced as the subtleties of one man's faith? What, after all, is the nature of the particular conversation the president feels he has with God -- a colloquy upon which the world now precariously turns?

That very issue is what Jim Wallis wishes he could sit and talk about with George W. Bush. That's impossible now, he says. He is no longer invited to the White House.

"Faith can cut in so many ways," he said. "If you're penitent and not

triumphal, it can move us to repentance and accountability and help us reach for something higher than ourselves. That can be a powerful thing, a thing that moves us beyond politics as usual, like Martin Luther King did. But when it's designed to certify our righteousness -- that can be a dangerous thing. Then it pushes self-criticism aside. There's no reflection.

"Where people often get lost is on this very point," he said after a moment of thought. "Real faith, you see, leads us to deeper reflection and not -- not ever -- to the thing we as humans so very much want."

And what is that?

"Easy certainty."

Ron Suskind was the senior national-affairs reporter for The Wall Street Journal from 1993 to 2000. He is the author most recently of "The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House and the Education of Paul O'Neill."

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