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Stuck With Bush

BOB HERBERT (op-ed)
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If George W. Bush could have been removed from office for being a bad president, he would have been sent back to his ranch a long time ago.

If incompetence were a criminal offense, he'd be behind bars.

But that's just daydreaming. The reality is that there are more than two and a half years left in the long dark night of the Bush presidency -- nearly as long as the entire time John Kennedy was in office.

The nation seems, very belatedly, to be catching on to the tragic failures and monumental ineptitude of its president. Mr. Bush's poll numbers are abysmal. Republicans up for re-election are running from him as if he were the bogymen.

Callers to conservative talk radio programs who were once ecstatic about the president and his policies are now deeply disillusioned.

The libertarian Cato Institute is about to release a study titled "Power Surge: The Constitutional Record of George W. Bush." It says, "Unfortunately, far from defending the Constitution, President Bush has repeatedly sought to strip out the limits the document places on federal power." While I disagree with parts of the study, I certainly agree with that particular comment.

In the current issue of Rolling Stone, Sean Wilentz, a distinguished historian and the director of the American Studies program at Princeton University, takes a serious look at the possibility that Mr. Bush may be the worst president in the nation's history.

What in the world took so long? Some of us have known since the moment he hopped behind the wheel that this reckless president was driving the nation headlong toward a cliff.

The worst thing he did, of course, was to employ a massive campaign of deceit to lead the nation into a catastrophic war in Iraq -- a war with no end in sight that has already claimed tens of thousands of lives and inflicted scores of thousands of crippling injuries.

When he was a young man, Mr. Bush used the Air National Guard to hide out from the draft in a time of war. Then, as president, he's suddenly G. I. George, strutting around in a flight suit, threatening to wage war on all and sundry, and taunting the insurgents in Iraq with a cry of "bring them on."

When the nation needed leadership on the critical problem of global warming, Mr. Bush took his cues from the honchos in the oil and gasoline industry, the very people who were setting the planet on fire. Now he talks about overcoming the nation's addiction to oil! This is amazing. Here's the president of the United States scaling the very heights of chutzpah. The Bush people and the oil people are indistinguishable. Condoleezza Rice, a former Chevron director, even had an oil tanker named after her.

Among the complaints in the Cato study is that the Bush administration has taken the position that despite validly enacted laws to the contrary, the president cannot be restrained "from pursuing any tactic he believes to be effective in the war on terror."

This view has led to activities that I believe have brought great shame to the nation: the warrantless spying on Americans, the abuses at Abu Ghraib, the creation of the C.I.A.'s network of secret prisons, extraordinary rendition and the barbaric encampment at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in which detainees are held, without regard to guilt or innocence, in a nightmarish no man's land beyond the reach of any reasonable judicial process.

The sins of the Bush administration are so extensive and so egregious, they could never be adequately addressed in a newspaper column. History will be the final judge. But I've no doubt about the ultimate verdict.

Remember the Clinton budget surplus?

It was the largest in American history. President Bush and his cronies went after it like vultures feasting in a field of carcasses. They didn't invest the surplus. They devoured it.

Remember how most of the world responded with an extraordinary outpouring of sympathy and support for America in the immediate aftermath of Sept. 11?

Mr. Bush had no idea how to seize that golden opportunity to build new alliances and strengthen existing ones. Much of that solidarity with America has morphed into outright hostility.

Remember Katrina?

The major task of Congress and the voters for the remainder of the Bush presidency is to curtail the destructive impulses of this administration, and to learn the lessons that will prevent similar horrors from ever happening again.