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**Section:**

Person of the Year

**PERSON OF THE YEAR**

Eagles rather than doves nestle in the Oval Office Christmas tree, pinecones the size of footballs are piled around the fireplace, and the President of the United States is pretty close to lounging in Armchair One. He's wearing a blue pinstripe suit, and his shoes are shined bright enough to shave in. He is loose, lively, framing a point with his hands or extending his arm with his fingers up as though he's throwing a big idea gently across the room.

"I've had a lot going on, so I haven't been in a very reflective mood," says the man who has just replaced half his Cabinet, dispatched 12,000 more troops into battle, arm wrestled lawmakers over an intelligence bill, held his third economic summit and begun to lay the second-term paving stones on which he will walk off into history. Asked about his re-election, he replies, "I think over the Christmas holidays it'll all sink in."

As he says this, George W. Bush is about to set a political record. The first TIME poll since the election has his approval rating at 49%. Gallup has it at 53%, which doesn't sound bad unless you consider that it's the lowest December rating for a re-elected President in Gallup's history. That is not a great concern, however, since he has run his last race, and it is not a surprise to a President who tends to measure his progress by the enemies he makes. "Sometimes you're defined by your critics," he says. "My presidency is one that has drawn some fire, whether it be at home or around the world. Unfortunately, if you're doing big things, most of the time you're never going to be around to see them [to fruition], whether it be cultural change or spreading democracy in parts of the world where people just don't believe it can happen. I understand that. I don't expect many

short-term historians to write nice things about me."

Yet even halfway through his presidency, Bush says, he already sees his historic gamble paying off. He watched in satisfaction the inauguration of Afghan President Hamid Karzai. "I'm not suggesting you're looking at the final chapter in Afghanistan, but the elections were amazing. And if you go back and look at the prognosis about Afghanistan--whether it be the decision [for the U.S. to invade] in the first place, the 'quagmire,' whether or not the people can even vote--it's a remarkable experience." Bush views his decision to press for the transformation of Afghanistan and then Iraq--as opposed to "managing calm in the hopes that there won't be another September 11th, that the Salafist [radical Islamist] movement will somehow wither on the vine, that somehow these killers won't get a weapon of mass destruction"--as the heart of not just his foreign policy but his victory. "The election was about the use of American influence," he says. "I can remember people trying to shift the debate. I wanted the debate to be on a lot of issues, but I also wanted everybody to clearly understand exactly what my thinking was. The debates and all the noise and all the rhetoric were aimed at making very clear the stakes in this election when it comes to foreign policy."

In that respect and throughout the 2004 campaign, Bush was guided by his own definition of a winning formula. "People think during elections, 'What's in it for me?'" says communications director Dan Bartlett, and expanding democracy in Iraq, a place voters were watching smolder on the nightly news, was not high on their list. Yet "every time we'd have a speech and attempt to scale back the liberty section, he would get mad at us," Bartlett says. Sometimes the President would simply take his black Sharpie and write the word freedom between two paragraphs to prompt himself to go into his extended argument for America's efforts to plant the seeds of liberty in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East.

An ordinary politician tells swing voters what they want to hear; Bush invited them to vote for him because he refused to. Ordinary politicians need to be liked; Bush finds the hostility of his critics reassuring. Challengers run as outsiders, promising change; it's an extraordinary politician who tries this while holding the title Leader of the Free World. Ordinary Presidents have made mistakes and then sought to redeem themselves by admitting them; when Bush was told by some fellow Republicans that his fate depended on confessing his errors, he blew them off.

For candidates, getting elected is the test that counts. Ronald Reagan did it by keeping things vague: It's Morning in America. Bill Clinton did it by keeping things small, running in peaceful times on school uniforms and V chips. Bush ran big and bold and specific all at the same time, rivaling Reagan in breadth of vision and Clinton in tactical ingenuity. He surpassed both men in winning bigger majorities in Congress and the statehouses. And he did it all while conducting an increasingly unpopular war, with an economy on tiptoes and a public conflicted about many issues but most of all about him.

The argument over whether his skill won the race and fueled a realignment of American politics or whether he was the lucky winner of a coin-toss election will last just as long as the debates among historians over whether Dwight Eisenhower had a "hidden-hand strategy" in dealing with political

problems, Richard Nixon was at all redeemable and Reagan was an "amiable dunce." Democrats may conclude that they don't need to learn a thing, since 70,000 Ohioans changing their minds would have flipped the outcome and flooded the airwaves with commentary about the flamboyantly failed Bush presidency. It may be that a peculiar chemistry of skills and instincts and circumstances gave Bush his victory in a way no future candidates can copy. But that doesn't mean they won't try.

In the meantime, the lessons Bush draws from his victory are the ones that matter most. The man who in 2000 promised to unite and not divide now sounds as though he is prepared to leave as his second-term legacy the Death of Compromise. "I've got the will of the people at my back," he said at the moment of victory. From here on out, bipartisanship means falling in line: "I'll reach out to everyone who shares our goals." Whatever spirit of cooperation that survives in his second term may have to be found among his opponents; he has made it clear he's not about to change his mind as he takes on Social Security and the tax code in pursuit of his "ownership society." So unfolds the strange and surprising and high-stakes decade of Bush.

For sharpening the debate until the choices bled, for reframing reality to match his design, for gambling his fortunes--and ours--on his faith in the power of leadership, George W. Bush is TIME's 2004 Person of the Year.

The living room of Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, is a place for thinking. There are big windows with long views, a wall of books and on one side a table that is usually freckled with jigsaw pieces. It was a few days after New Year's in 2003. The President had been out clearing cedar, and Laura Bush was lying on a sofa reading, or at least pretending to. That Christmas holiday was a deep breath between the 2002 midterm elections and the walk-up to the war in Iraq. Karl Rove, chief strategist for the Bush re-election campaign, arrived at the house with his faded blue canvas briefcase in hand. He had come to help put together a different kind of puzzle.

On his laptop was a PowerPoint pitch titled POTUS Presentation to project on the beige walls. It was no secret what the first piece of Bush's re-election strategy would be: to reach out to the base and make sure the Evangelicals, who Rove believed stayed home in 2000, came out this time. But appealing just to one part of one party would never produce 270 electoral votes, so Rove had prepared a series of slides, each with a great big goal in tall letters: BROADEN, PERSUADE, GROW. These were designed to show how Bush could assemble a winning majority by inspiring his party's most ardent supporters while also drawing in more typically Democratic voters, like Hispanics, Catholics and suburban moderates, among others.

But before Rove could begin his song and dance, Bush cut in. "You're not the only smart guy that's been thinking about it," he said. "So before we get going, let me tell you what I've been thinking about." Bush had learned something from the midterm elections, in which he had gambled his popularity by swooping into tight races. Although the President's party usually loses ground in midseason, with his help the Republicans had made historic gains. That fueled Bush's faith in what could happen when a President resists the temptation to sit tight and instead is willing to spend political capital. For the 2004 campaign, Bush told Rove, he wanted to spend again to further expand his party's majority in Congress. Bush intended to keep doing risky and not necessarily

popular things; to lead a revolution, he would need more troops.

As for his re-election campaign, Bush told Rove, it would be all too easy to focus on just three things: "raising the money, running the television ads and moving around the country in the big blue bird." But Bush had no interest in a classic corporate Republican operation that had a lot of money and not much passion. The Democrats are supposed to be the party with the deep grass roots and the ardent volunteers, but in 2000 Bush had managed to draft an army that saw itself as a band of outsiders storming the gates. "It gave people a lot of energy and enthusiasm," he said. "We can't lose that. I want to leave it so that some number of years from now, people look back and say, 'You know, I really wasn't involved much in politics until the Bush-Cheney '04 campaign asked me to get involved.'"

### **Keep to the Right**

When the race began for real last spring, Bush had the support of 91% of Republicans and 17% of Democrats. This was the biggest gap in the history of the Gallup poll, and it led journalists to write about the Polarizing President and armchair strategists to remind the White House of the First Rule of Politics: once your base gets you nominated, you have to soften the edges and sweet-talk the center to get elected. Bush had honored the rule by running in 2000 as a "compassionate conservative," which was code for "I'm not as mean as Newt Gingrich or Tom DeLay"; by working with Ted Kennedy on the No Child Left Behind Act; and by diluting any claim to fiscal conservatism with his support for prescription-drug benefits and a bloated farm bill. But it is a sign of Bush's political flexibility that, when it suits him, he can reject flexibility.

In his re-election year, far from becoming more accommodating, Bush seemed to do the reverse. In the summer of 2000 he delivered a bridge-building address to the N.A.A.C.P.; in the summer of 2004 he snubbed the organization. Two-thirds of Americans favored extension of the assault-weapons ban; in September he conspicuously let it die. He repeatedly offered swing voters expressly what they told pollsters they did not want: a multiyear commitment in Iraq, a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, Social Security private accounts, restricted federal funding of stem-cell research. The most he would do is hint that radioactive Attorney General John Ashcroft wouldn't make it to a second Bush presidency. But even at the height of the Abu Ghraib prison-abuse scandal, Bush would not consider calls to dump Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. "If you're wasting your time coming up with a way to recommend this, don't," he told a bunch of top aides in an Oval Office meeting. "And you make sure other people know this. This is absolutely the wrong time for this to be happening."

Most voters said they were looking for a change in direction, but Bush was betting that what they wanted more was leadership. Through it all, the one category in which he never fell behind John Kerry in the polls was being a strong leader. In dangerous times, courage is a currency, so while Kerry ran on his combat record, Bush, who didn't have one, suggested that the courage that matters most in a politician is the political kind. "The role of the President is not to follow the path of the latest polls," he told voters. "Whether you agree with me or not, you know where I stand, what I believe and where I'm going to lead. You cannot say that about my opponent." By taking a hard line on divisive issues, he made character--not his record--the issue.

If you go hunting for Bush's margin of victory, you won't find it among Evangelicals, who voted in roughly the same proportion as in the past. You'll find it among groups that traditionally don't vote Republican. Bush improved his standing among blacks, Jews, Hispanics, women, city dwellers, Catholics, seniors and people who don't go to church. His biggest improvement came in the bluest of regions, the corridor from Maryland up through New Jersey and New York to Massachusetts. In Kerry's home state, Bush found close to 200,000 more voters than he did in 2000. He won a majority of the vote in a country that a majority of voters thought was heading in the wrong direction. Since, according to polls, more people consider themselves conservatives than liberals, he didn't need to win over a majority of the voters in the middle. He just needed to convince enough to put him over the top.

### Run as an Outsider

During the 2000 campaign, Bush never left home without a podium. To support the promise to "restore honor and dignity to the White House" and combat the notion that he was a lightweight, his team wanted to make him look presidential whenever possible. But four years later, with the re-election campaign under way, his imagemakers had the opposite worry. There was too much pomp, too many suits. They needed to get him out from behind the lectern and let him be a regular guy. So Bush went from set speeches to town-hall meetings, from suits to shirtsleeves.

Of course, the audiences were carefully screened to admit only high-fiber Bush supporters. And on most nights the candidate was back home in the First Bedroom because he doesn't much like hotels. But the overall goal of running an outsider campaign came naturally. Bush has been President for only four years but has always been a punk at heart--the guy who in 1973 used to walk around Harvard during antiwar protests wearing cowboy boots and a bomber jacket, who was an outsider even in his own, high-achieving family (the black sheep, he once told the Queen of England). Forty-one newspapers that endorsed Bush back when he ran as a pragmatic reformer revoked their support this time around. But that just made it easier; he was running against the mainstream media, and his campaign was feeding the bloggers and surfing talk radio. "You wouldn't have known that we were the out party," says Al From, founder of the Democratic Leadership Council, "because we defended the status quo on some stuff. Bush was able to sound like he was the guy who wanted to be a reformer and be the outsider."

Expanding the party depended on reaching out to outsiders, the literal ones, pioneers of the new American frontiers that ring the old cities and suburbs--places like Colorado's Douglas County, Ohio's Delaware County and Farmwell Hunt in Ashburn, Va., which advertises itself as a place "where family values, engaged residents, nature, fun and safety come together to form a premier community." And then he went even further, to the rural communities that Presidents don't visit very much because of the potential inefficiencies of spending precious time on such sparsely populated locales. Bush put dozens of such communities on his itinerary, and he can still rattle off their names. In "Poplar Bluff, Mo.," he notes, "23,000 people showed up in a town of 16,000 people." He won 97 of the 100 fastest-growing counties in the country--generally by a wide margin. Visiting so many obscure towns, Bush says in retrospect, "was an interesting strategy that really paid off." The President remembers a local official saying to him when he visited Marquette, Mich., "I think you will have seen 50% of the people in this area on this one trip."

Because the strategy worked, Democrats admit they'll have to look hard at their own model, which focused more on turning out loyal voters than on finding new ones. "The President was freshly minting Republicans all over the country, while we were building the greatest turnout machine ever," says Kerry adviser Mike McCurry. "The moral is that I don't think you could do a better job of funding, organizing and deploying a paid get-out-the-vote effort than we did, and it's just not enough to beat a Republican Party that is growing."

### Turn into the Wind

If a central drama of the slaloming Kerry campaign was his agreeing with the last person he spoke to, the drama of the Bush campaign was his refusing to. "If you know me, I guess that's called stubborn," the President says. Whenever an aide comes back to him with reports of receiving a hostile reaction to one of his policy proposals, from bureaucrats bucking intelligence reform or members of Congress squealing about his budget, Bush greets the embattled aide with the same phrase: "You must be doing something right." A Bush adviser puts it more bluntly: "He likes being hated. It lets him know he's doing the right thing."

People close to Bush have their theories about this. Some think he likes the cries of outrage because they signal that he's making tough calls, which is how he views his job description. "Part of it could be his faith," says an adviser. "Being persecuted is not always a bad thing." Some of it may be learned. He has hated the political echo chamber ever since he watched insiders he viewed as self-preserving and backbiting carve up his father's Administration. When you're a lie-in-wait politician like Bush, who has gained so much from being underestimated, absorbing criticism toughens your skin and eases the wait for the coming reward. "There's no victory for Bush that is sweeter," says an aide, "than the one he was told he couldn't have."

Bush admits to savoring a good fight. "I think the natural instinct for most people in the political world is they want people to like them," he says. "On the other hand, I think sometimes I take kind of a delight in who the critics are." He talks about how he relishes the moment when the political world is at his feet as he stands before Congress to deliver the State of the Union. "Sometimes I look through that teleprompter and see reactions," he recalls. "I'm not going to characterize what the reactions are, but nevertheless it causes me to want to lean a little more forward into the prompter, if you know what I mean. Maybe it's the mother in me." As he says that, he practically leans out of his chair, as though his antagonists were there in the room.

So the President didn't mind taking on his campaign opponent earlier and more frequently than sitting Presidents are supposed to. When Bush first referred to Kerry in a campaign speech in early March, he was criticized for trading away the power and prestige of the office and elevating Kerry in the process. "His office is the coin of the realm," a Washington political veteran said at the time, "and he's squandering it." Instead of sitting back and enjoying the Rose Garden, though, Bush felt he had to define Kerry before the Massachusetts Senator could define himself. "He discovered in 2000 that campaigns are choices and not referendums," says Bush's media adviser, Mark McKinnon. "You have to frame the choice, or your opponent will frame it for you. So unlike 2000, in 2004 he came up to the plate with a big bat."

The piece of advice Bush ignored most diligently was the call for him to admit mistakes. It was not just the New York Times demanding that he apologize for alleging there was a link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, or Michael Moore saying he should apologize to dead soldiers' families for sending their kids into a war over oil. It was also a chorus of Republican wise men, like one who e-mailed a top White House official after a presidential press conference. "I wish he had found a way to admit a mistake. The press corps is not going to let the issue go away," the e-mailer wrote. He even offered Bush a script: "One mistake was my initial opposition to [establishing the Department of] Homeland Security. Another mistake was initial opposition to the 9/11 commission, and another mistake was my failure to address the problems between the FBI and the CIA." As Kerry became more aggressive in his criticism of Bush's Iraq policy, other Republicans said the President had to beat back the challenger's charge that Bush was out of touch. "We had to admit that we'd gotten some things wrong," said a senior Republican, "or we were beginning to look like we were living on another planet."

The Bush camp was hearing all this and debating the price of admission. "It was one that we constantly talked about," says a senior White House adviser. "During Abu Ghraib, people were calling for people's heads," says another, "and the President was unwilling to just fire somebody because it would satisfy people." Besides, Bush thought people were basically looking for him to call the whole Iraq invasion a mistake, which he was not about to do. Privately, he did acknowledge there had been blunders, but that didn't mean it made sense to say so publicly. At the second presidential debate, a town-hall meeting of undecided voters, a woman called Linda Grabel asked Bush to name three mistakes he had made while in office. A part of Bush wanted to answer; his father had landed in trouble during a town-hall debate when he fumbled a young woman's question about how the national debt personally affected him. But when you are running a character campaign, Bush felt, you don't wring your hands. So he dodged the question, and Kerry walloped him for doing so.

Then a funny thing happened on the way to the motorcade. Once the cameras were off, Bush went into the audience and tracked Grabel down. "I appreciate your question," he told her, according to an aide. "And I hope you appreciate my answer, because with the political climate we live in, I know it was not your intent to play gotcha with the President of the United States. But this is where it ends up. Let me just assure you, I know that I haven't done everything right."

### **Keep Your Focus**

Bush's famous loyalty, both to people and policies without apparent regard for performance, lay at the heart of the demands for contrition. His critics deplored the stubbornness that often prevents him from stretching beyond the limits of his experience. When it comes to setting policy, they argued, the risks of shutting out dissent and refusing to adjust course have become increasingly clear. But when it comes to running for office, his aides felt, there was a great advantage in having a candidate who set a strategy and then stuck to it as well as to his team.

Most campaigns are known for carnage and chaos. Bob Dole left staff members on the tarmac when he fired them. Clinton had an official campaign team and then the whole secret shadow operation of Dick Morris. Kerry's campaign had more layers than a baklava, and as an aide

complained, "he never gave the same speech twice." In Bushland, aides didn't have to be worried that someone would go around or undermine them or that they would be thrown under the bus at the first sign of trouble. "I've been more worried about job security in city-council races than the presidential," says McKinnon. "That gave us the ability to focus and do our job. I would get calls from the chief of staff in the middle of the campaign saying, 'Got everything you need?' That's unheard of--not to bitch or fire me but to see if I needed anything."

It's easy to have a happy and loyal campaign team when everything's going fine. But for much of the spring and summer, Bush was behind in the polls, and the pundits' predictions were growing more dire. Undecided voters would break for Kerry. No President had won with an approval rating below 50% so late in the campaign. More than 60% of Americans thought the country was on the wrong track. The war was a mess. It's eternally tempting for politicians to trade away principles while campaigning and say they will reconcile things when they win. But Bush aides insist that wasn't in their playbook. "Campaign meetings I was in when the President was 8 points down felt the same as campaign meetings when the President was 8 points up," says outgoing Republican National Committee chairman Ed Gillespie. In fact, Democrats admitted to feeling some envy of the Bush team's discipline. Says former Kerry campaign manager Jim Jordan: "They understand that politics is a game of checkers, not chess," a steady progression in one direction across the field of play. "The quality of your plan," says Jordan, "is not as important as the quality of your execution."

Once re-elected, Bush had no time to lose. The two years he has before he's perceived as a lame duck will be the most powerful period of his presidency, given his enlarged majority in Congress and the absence of any election distractions. Bush is already the most legislatively successful President since Lyndon Johnson, according to the Congressional Quarterly; roughly 80% of the legislation he supported has passed. But his domestic goals for the second term--from Social Security reform to tax restructuring to deficit reduction--mirror in ambition the foreign policy revolution of his first. In his second term, he will need to make peace with a Congress that sees the world differently from its end of Pennsylvania Avenue. Not just Democrats but fellow Republicans as well carry some bruises from the first term, during which they feel they were treated like junior partners in everything from the fight over tax cuts to the war on terrorism.

So it was a kinder, gentler Rove who descended on the annual G.O.P. congressional retreat at the Tides Inn on the Chesapeake Bay on the last day of November. As Bush told TIME, "Taking the issue [of Social Security reform] on will require a certain amount of political courage in the legislative body." The President's victory, Rove told the delegates, proved that voters will reward candidates who show guts on a tough issue like Social Security. But it was not lost on the lawmakers that they are the ones who will face voters in the future--some in 2006--so they pushed back. "This cannot be done by sheer force," says a top Republican staff member, characterizing one lawmaker's reaction to Rove. "We are not carrying the water ourselves. If you say you have political capital, we're ready to see you place some bets with it." Many Americans are not convinced that Bush has so much capital. The TIME poll found that only 33% believe he has a mandate to change Social Security so people can invest in private accounts; just 38% say he has a mandate to change the tax code. So lawmakers are demanding a major sales-and-p.r. job by Bush and a detailed plan. They insist the President not send up vague principles and expect Congress to



work out the politically dangerous details.

As it happens, that kind of campaign is just what Bush had in mind. Within two weeks, he would have leaders from both parties up to the White House to look for common ground. The re-election campaign machine is being retooled. Bush will hit the road for town-hall meetings designed to prove that inaction is dangerous, to demystify the policy and to fly over the "filter" of the national media. Rove is working the conservative interest groups, business lobbies and think tanks to use their leverage to sell the public and sway lawmakers. The 1.2 million Bush campaign volunteers will be called into service to create public pressure on lawmakers.

In his pursuit of a second term, Bush was just as radical as he was in his conduct of a pre-emptive war. As a politician, he showed the same discipline, secrecy and nerve he demonstrated in his conduct as President. So he emerges with his faith only deepened in the transformational power of clear leadership. Whether or not the election actually yielded a mandate for his policies, he is sure to claim one for his style, because he stuck to it against all odds, much advice and the lessons of history. And on that choice at least, the results are in.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): HIS DOMAIN President Bush in the Oval Office in early December

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): REACHING OUT Bush phones a world leader as Condi Rice, in the foreground, listens

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): SPEED RACER At a Secret Service training facility, Bush bikes and listens to Van Morrison's Brown Eyed Girl on his iPod

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): POWER LUNCH Bush calls a Senator during a meal with Vice President Dick Cheney

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): MAKING FRIENDS The President receives the new ambassador from Chad and his family

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): HEADING OUT In the elevator of their residence, the First Lady checks Bush's suit

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): TO WORK Bush, with his beloved dog Barney, enters the Oval Office the back way

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE)

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By Nancy Gibbs and John F. Dickerson

With reporting by Mitch Frank, New York and Douglas Waller, Washington

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