

Bush's credibility gap showing in Iraq



DURING President Bush's recent campaign stop in Wilkes-Barre, he charged that his Democratic

opponent John Kerry had a "20-year history of weakness" in the United States Senate and a "strategy of defeat" in Iraq.

Pinning his re-election bid on the "fear factor," Mr. Bush is betting that voters will overlook his abysmal domestic record on health care, education, and the economy because of a fear that international terrorists will strike again on American soil without his leadership. He also believes that that message will play well in Northeast Pennsylvania.

To be sure, Pennsylvania is a battleground state in this election, and the Northeast region, in particular, will be critical in determining the outcome of the contest. Since Mr. Bush's economic policies favor large corporations and the very wealthy, they alienate most people here, who are living on modest incomes. But the area is also fiercely patriotic and Mr. Bush is counting on that sympathy to win the vote here. It is an insult to the intelligence of those voters who have carefully followed his prosecution of the Iraqi War.

The recent presidential debates and the congressional investigation of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks have revealed the credibility gap the Bush administration has created in the so-called "War on Terrorism."

First, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration insisted that the president and his deputies had "no credible

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evidence that al-Qaeda was about to strike U.S. soil." But the 567-page report of the bipartisan congressional investigation that was released earlier this year revealed that a special intelligence briefing titled, "Bin Laden Determined to Attack in U.S.," had been presented to Mr. Bush on Aug. 6, 2001. The briefing warned that "a group of bin Laden supporters was in the U.S." planning attacks with explosives and made clear that this threat was "both current and serious."

Second, after 9/11, the Bush administration insisted that there were ties between al-Qaida and Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, who was threatening world peace with a significant stockpile of weapons of mass destruction.

Ignoring multilateral efforts for peace, the administration launched a pre-emptive war against Iraq. But according to former State Department intelligence chief Gregory Thielman, the consensus of U.S. intelligence agencies well in advance of the war was that there was no significant pattern of cooperation between Iraq and the al-Qaida terrorist operation. A year later, U.S. military forces have still not uncovered any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Third, last year, the Bush administration requested and received an \$87 billion budget to reconstruct war-torn Iraq. But according to a joint report prepared by the United Nations and the World Bank, basic

reconstruction would cost much less than half that amount. Combined with the initial \$79 billion cost of the invasion and conquest of Iraq, the reconstruction budget raised the total spending on the Iraq war to \$166 billion. That figure will continue to grow as long as there is a U.S. presence in that country. Worse, the burden for assuming payment falls squarely on the American taxpayer, not by the giant U.S. corporations which are reaping guaranteed profits in contracts.

Finally, more than three dozen current and former civilian and military officials who participated directly in planning for the Iraqi war and its aftermath, recently revealed that the Bush administration invaded that country without a comprehensive plan in place to "win the peace." Instead, the administration failed to: supply proper body armor for the troops, the additional troops that American military commanders originally requested, and significant financial and military assistance required from other countries in the small international coalition that exists to rebuild Iraq. As a result, U.S. soldiers account for 81 percent of the troops shouldering the burden and, as of last week, 1,076 of those soldiers have lost their lives.

What this country needs is responsible leadership, the flexibility to change course when a policy is not working, (and) willingness to build an international coalition in order to solve the terrorist threat, instead of alienating the United States from the world community.

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