By Bob Woodward

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There's actually a lot that President-elect Barack Obama can learn from the troubled presidency of George W. Bush. Over the past eight years, I have interviewed President Bush for nearly 11 hours, spent hundreds of hours with his administration's key players and reviewed thousands of pages of documents and notes. That produced four books, totaling 1,727 pages, that amount to a very long case study in presidential decision-making, and there are plenty of morals to the story. Presidents live in the unfinished business of their predecessors, and Bush casts a giant shadow on the Obama presidency with two incomplete wars and a monumental financial and economic crisis. Here are 10 lessons that Obama and his team should take away from the Bush experience.

1. ***Presidents set the tone. Don't be passive or tolerate virulent divisions.***

In the fall of 2002, Bush witnessed a startling face-off between National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in the White House Situation Room after Rumsfeld had briefed the National Security Council on the Iraq war plan. Rice wanted to hold on to a copy of the Pentagon briefing slides, code-named Polo Step. "You won't be needing that," Rumsfeld said, reaching across the table and snatching the Top Secret packet away from Rice -- in front of the president. "I'll let you two work it out," Bush said, then turned and walked out. Rice had to send an aide to the Pentagon to get a bootlegged copy from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Bush should never have put up with Rumsfeld's power play. Instead of a team of rivals, Bush wound up with a team of back-stabbers with long-running, poisonous disagreements about foreign policy fundamentals.

2. ***The President must insist that everyone speak out loud in front of the others, even -- or especially -- when there are vehement disagreements.***

During the same critical period, Vice President Cheney was urging Secretary of State Colin Powell to consider seriously the possibility that Iraq might be connected to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Powell found the case worse than ridiculous and scornfully concluded that Cheney had what Powell termed a "fever." (In private, Powell used to call the Pentagon policy shop run by Undersecretary of Defense Douglas J. Feith, who shared Cheney's burning interest in supposed ties between al-Qaeda and Iraq, a "Gestapo office.") Powell was right to conclude that Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden did not work together. But Cheney and Powell did not have this crucial debate in front of the president -- even though such a discussion might have undermined one key reason for war. Cheney provided private advice to the president, but he was rarely asked to argue with others and test his case. After the invasion, Cheney had a celebratory dinner with some aides and friends. "Colin always had major reservations about what we were trying to do," Cheney told the group as they toasted Bush and laughed at Powell. This sort of derision undermined the administration's unity of purpose -- and suggests the nasty tone that can emerge when open debate is stifled by long-running feuds and personal hostility.

3. ***A President must do the homework to master the fundamental ideas and concepts behind his policies.***

The President should not micromanage, but understanding the ramifications of his positions cannot be outsourced to anyone. For example, Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the commander of the U.S. forces in Iraq in 2004-07, concluded that President Bush lacked a basic grasp of what the Iraq war was about. Casey believed that Bush, who kept asking for enemy body counts, saw the war as a conventional battle, rather than the counterinsurgency campaign to win over the Iraqi population that it was. "We cannot kill our way to victory in Iraq," Gen. David Petraeus said later. In May 2008, Bush insisted to me that he, of all people, knew all too well what the war was about.

4. ***Presidents need to draw people out and make sure that bad news makes it to the Oval Office.***

On June 18, 2003, before real trouble had developed in Iraq, retired Army Lt. Gen. Jay Garner, the first official to head the Iraqi reconstruction effort, warned Rumsfeld that disbanding the Iraqi army and purging too many former Baath Party loyalists had been "tragic" mistakes. But in an Oval Office meeting with Bush later that day, none of this came up, and Garner reported to a pleased president that, in 70 meetings with Iraqis, they had always said, "God bless Mr. George Bush." Bush should have asked Garner whether he had any worries -- perhaps even kicking Rumsfeld out of the Oval Office and saying something like, "Jay, you were there. I insist on the ground truth. Don't hold anything back."

Bush sometimes assumed that he knew his aides' private views without asking them one-on-one. He made probably the most important decision of his presidency -- whether to invade Iraq -- without directly asking either Powell, Rumsfeld or Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet for their bottom-line recommendations. (Instead of consulting his own father, former president George H.W. Bush, who had gone to war in 1991 to kick the Iraqi army out of Kuwait, the younger Bush told me that he had appealed to a "higher father" for strength.)

5. ***Presidents need to foster a culture of skepticism and doubt.***

During a December 2003 interview with Bush, I read him a quote from his closest ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, about the experience of receiving letters from family members of slain soldiers who had written that they hated him. "And don't believe anyone who tells you when they receive letters like that, they don't suffer any doubt," Blair had said.

"Yeah," Bush replied. "I haven't suffered doubt."

Is that right?" I asked. "Not at all?"

"No," he said.

Presidents and generals don't have to live on doubt. But they should learn to love it. "You should not be the parrot on the secretary's shoulder," said Marine Gen. James Jones,

Obama's incoming national security adviser, to his old friend Gen. Peter Pace, who was then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- a group Jones thought had been "systematically emasculated by Rumsfeld." Doubt is not the enemy of good policy; it can help leaders evaluate alternatives, handle big decisions and later make course corrections if necessary.

6. ***Presidents get contradictory data, and they need a rigorous way to sort it out.***

In 2004-06, the CIA was reporting that Iraq was getting more violent and less stable. By mid-2006, Bush's own NSC deputy for Iraq, Meghan O'Sullivan, had a blunt assessment of conditions in Baghdad: "It's hell, Mr. President." But the Pentagon remained optimistic and reported that a strategy of drawing down U.S. troops and turning security over to the Iraqis would end in "self-reliance" in 2009. As best I could discover, the president never insisted that the contradiction between "hell" and "self-reliance" be resolved.

7. ***Presidents must tell the public the hard truth, even if that means delivering very bad news.***

For years after the Iraq invasion, Bush consistently offered upbeat public assessments. That went well beyond the infamous "Mission Accomplished" banner that he admitted last Monday had been a mistake. "Absolutely, we're winning," the president said during an October 2006 news conference. "We're winning." His confident remarks came during one of the lowest points of the war, at a time when anyone with a TV screen knew that the war was going badly. On Feb. 5, 2005, as he was moving up from his first-term role as Rice's deputy to become national security adviser, Stephen J. Hadley had offered a private, confidential assessment of the problems of Bush's Iraq-dominated first term. "I give us a B-minus for policy development," he said, "and a D-minus for policy execution." The president later told me that he knew that the Iraq "strategy wasn't working." So how could the United States be winning a war with a failing strategy?

After 9/11, Bush spoke forthrightly about a war on terror that might last a generation and include other attacks on the U.S. homeland. That straight talk marked the period of Bush's greatest leadership and highest popularity. A president is strong when he is the voice of realism.

8. ***Righteous motives are not enough for effective policy.***

"I believe we have a duty to free people," Bush told me in late 2003. I believe that he truly wanted to bring democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq. In preparing his second inaugural address in 2005, for example, Bush told his chief speechwriter, Michael Gerson, "The future of America and the security of America depends on the spread of liberty." That got the idealistic Gerson so pumped that he set out to produce the foreign policy equivalent of Albert Einstein's unified field theory of the universe -- a 17-minute inaugural address in which the president said that his goal was nothing less than "the ending of tyranny in our world."

But this high purpose often blinded Bush and his aides to the consequences of this mad dash to democracy. In 2005, for example, Bush and his war cabinet spent much of their

time promoting free elections in Iraq -- which wound up highlighting the isolation of the minority Sunnis and setting the stage for the raging sectarian violence of 2006.

9. ***Presidents must insist on strategic thinking.***

Only the president (and perhaps the national security adviser) can prod a reactive bureaucracy to think about where the administration should be in one, two or four years. Then detailed, step-by-step tactical plans must be devised to try to get there. It's easy for an administration to become consumed with putting out brush fires, which often requires presidential involvement. (Ask Obama how much time he's been spending on the Gaza war.) But a president will probably be judged by the success of his long-range plans, not his daily crisis management.

For example, in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the quality of the planning for combat operations ranged from adequate to strong, but far too little attention was devoted to what might come after the fall of the Taliban and the Baath Party. Some critical strategic decisions -- to disband the Iraqi army, force Baathists out of government and abolish an initial Iraqi government council -- were made on the ground in Iraq, without the involvement of the NSC and the president.

Obama would do well to remember the example of a young Democratic president who was willing to make long-range plans. Bill Clinton began his presidency in 1993 after having promised to cut the federal deficit in half in four years. The initial plan looked shaky, and Clinton took a lot of heat for more than a year. But he and his team stuck to their basic strategy of cutting federal spending and raising taxes, which laid a major part of the foundation of the economic boom of the Clinton era. It was classic strategic planning, showing a willingness to pay a short-term price for the sort of long-term gains that go down in the history books.

10. ***The President should embrace transparency. Some version of the behind-the-scenes story of what happened in his White House will always make it out to the public -- and everyone will be better off if that version is as accurate as possible.***

On March 8, 2008, Hadley made an extraordinary remark about how difficult it has proven to understand the real way Bush made decisions. "He will talk with great authority and assertiveness," Hadley said. " 'This is what we're going to do.' And he won't mean it. Because he will not have gone through the considered process where he finally is prepared to say, 'I've decided.' And if you write all those things down and historians get them, [they] say, 'Well, he decided on this day to do such and such.' It's not true. It's not history. It's a fact, but it's a misleading fact."

Presidents should beware of such "misleading facts." They should run an internal, candid process of debate and discussion with key advisers that will make sense when it surfaces later. This sort of inside account will be told, at least in part, during the presidency. But the best obtainable version will emerge more slowly, over time, and become history.

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