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Black Thursday For Bush

By David S. Broder

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If President Bush is not reelected, we may look back on last Thursday, July 10, 2003, as the day the shadow of defeat first crossed his political horizon. To be sure, Bush looks strong. The CBS News poll released that evening had his approval rating at 60 percent, with solid support from his own party, a 26-point lead among independents and a near-even split among Democrats. Two-thirds of those surveyed could not name a single one of the nine Democrats vying for the right to oppose him.

But "The CBS Evening News" that night was like Karl Rove's worst nightmare, and the other network newscasts -- still the main source of information for a large number of Americans -- were not much better.

The headlines announced by John Roberts, substituting for Dan Rather on CBS, were: "President Bush's false claim about Iraqi weapons; he made it despite a CIA warning the intelligence was bad. More Americans say U.S. is losing control of Iraq. Also tonight, food lines in America; they're back and getting longer."

Brian Williams, filling in for Tom Brokaw on NBC, began: "War zone. Two more Americans dead in Iraq, and now the general who led the war says the troops could be there four more years."

Peter Jennings on ABC gave the administration a break, opening the broadcast with this: "The secretary of state says there was no attempt to deceive the American people about the case for war in Iraq." But then Jennings described Colin Powell's news conference as "damage control," an effort to explain "why the president used some false information in his State of the Union address to justify attacking Iraq."

All of them -- and cable news -- cited the dissonant voices from within the administration blaming one another for Bush's use of a report, which the CIA had long since discredited, claiming that Iraq tried to buy uranium for a nuclear weapons program from the African country of Niger.

Even after CIA Director George Tenet tried to take responsibility for the foul-up, the White House faces a credibility gap that reaches down into the non-discovery of the weapons of mass destruction Bush and his top associates said Saddam Hussein was amassing to threaten the United States.

And the doubts don't stop there. Two and a half months after Bush proclaimed victory in Iraq -- "mission accomplished" -- CBS reported that only 45 percent of the public now believes the United States is in control of events there. On the question of credibility regarding weapons of mass destruction, 56 percent say Bush administration officials were hiding important elements of what they knew or were outright lying.

The next day a Washington Post-ABC News poll reported that while Bush's approval score was still at a healthy 59 percent, there had been a 9-point drop in less than three weeks both in his overall rating and on the question of confidence in his handling of Iraq. Ominously, the poll found a dramatic reversal in public tolerance of continuing casualties, with a majority saying for the first time that the losses are unacceptable when weighed against the goals of the war.

Eight out of 10 in the Post-ABC poll said they were very or somewhat concerned that the United States "will get bogged down in a long and costly peacekeeping mission." And this was before the networks showed Gen. Tommy Franks telling Congress the troops would be in Iraq for years.

If Iraq looks increasingly worrisome on TV and in the polls, the economy is even worse. CBS found jobs and the economy dwarfing every other issue, cited by almost four times as many people as cited Iraq or the war on terrorism. On that black Thursday for the administration, first-time unemployment claims pushed the number of Americans on jobless relief to the highest level in 20 years.

And the most troubling pictures on any of the three broadcasts were those of a line of cars, stretching out of sight down a flat two-lane road in Logan, Ohio -- jobless and struggling families waiting for the twice-a-month distribution of free food by the local office of America's Second Harvest. The head of the agency said, "We are seeing a new phenomenon: Last year's food bank donors are now this year's food bank clients." Said CBS reporter Cynthia Bowers, "You could call it a line of the times, because in a growing number of American communities these days, making ends meet means waiting for a handout."

Some may say, "Well, it's one day's news," or dismiss it all as media bias. But that does not dissolve the shadow that now hangs over Bush's bright hopes for a second term.

David S. Broder will answer questions about this column during a Live Online discussion at 11 a.m. today at www.washingtonpost.com.

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