

nation and world

## Bush displays pride and penitence

**Outgoing president defends "good, strong record," concedes errors on Social Security, Abu Ghraib, WMDs**

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President George W. Bush exits the White House briefing room after his 47th full-scale conference. He described Monday's gathering as the "ultimate exit interview." (Saul Loeb)

WASHINGTON — A wistful and introspective President George W. Bush devoted a valedictory

news conference Monday to a robust defense of his "good, strong record," going further than he has gone before in conceding errors — but making it clear that he has few major regrets about his handling of Iraq, Hurricane Katrina and the other major events of his eight years in office.

The tone of the news conference — the "ultimate exit interview," as Bush jokingly called it — was in keeping with a stream of recent speeches and interviews that appeared to be aimed at setting the record straight after years of relentless pounding from critics in the media, the Democratic Party and elsewhere.

But Bush, seemingly freed to

### Extras

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speaking his mind as his tenure draws to a close, offered a bit more nuance and soul-searching than he usually does in such settings, pounding the lectern for emphasis at certain points and bantering with some of the reporters with whom he has sparred.

Asked about mistakes he had made while in office — a question that once famously stumped him — Bush rattled off several examples, saying that he regretted his decision to focus on Social Security reform after the 2004 elections, a drive that proved unsuccessful, instead of first addressing immigration issues.

Bush also said hanging a "Mission accomplished"

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sign on an aircraft carrier after the toppling of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003 was a "mistake."

He described the scandal surrounding the treatment of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq as a "huge disappointment," as he did the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in that country, which the administration had claimed, based on faulty intelligence.

But there were limits to Bush's contrition. "I have thought long and hard about Katrina," Bush told reporters gathered in the White House briefing room for his 47th full-scale news conference.

"You know, could I have done something differently, like land Air Force One either in New Orleans or Baton Rouge?"

Not much he'd do differently

Bush's answer suggested that he would not have done much different in responding to a crisis that even some of his former aides said damaged his standing with the American people. (The White House itself criticized the response in a report in February 2006.)

Asked later about what more should be done to help New Orleans, the president circled back to rebut the idea that the initial federal response to the natural disaster was slow.

Although "things" could have been done better, Bush said: "Don't tell me the federal response was slow when there was 30,000 people pulled off roofs right after the storm passed. I remember going to see those helicopter drivers, Coast Guard drivers, to thank them for their courageous efforts to rescue people off roofs. Thirty thousand people were pulled off roofs right after the storm moved through. It's a pretty quick response."

History will be final judge

Throughout the 47-minute session, the president's fundamental point was that he had done the best he could under trying circumstances — the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, two wars, a natural disaster and the biggest economic calamity since the Great Depression — and that history will be the final judge.

"I don't think you can possibly get the full breadth of an administration until time has passed," Bush said.

The news conference, his first extended session with the White House press corps since July, marked the start of a full final week of meetings with staff and other exit interviews. Today he will hold his final Cabinet meeting and plans to award the Medal of Freedom to three of the foreign leaders he has been closest to — former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, former Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe.

Also, the White House announced that Bush on Thursday will deliver a final farewell address to the American people, a ritual dating to George Washington.

Far from seeming depressed about his coming loss of power, Bush seemed largely in good spirits.

He opened the news conference by expressing appreciation for the media, even while he said that he did not like all the stories about him and thought, borrowing one of his famous malapropisms, that the press corps "sometimes underestimated me."

At another point, Bush pursed his lips and mocked the suggestion that the burdens of office are too great.

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Self-pity is "pathetic"

"It's kind of like, 'Why me? Oh, the burdens,' you know. 'Why did the financial collapse have to happen on my watch?' It's just — it's pathetic, isn't it, self-pity?" Bush said.

One question that seemed to touch a nerve involved the suggestion by some of his critics that America's moral standing in the world has been damaged by harsh interrogation tactics, the creation of a detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and the decision to go to war in Iraq without a mandate from the United Nations.

"It may be damaged amongst some of the elite," Bush replied, "but people still understand America stands for freedom, that America is a country that provides such great hope.

"You go to Africa, you ask Africans about America's generosity and compassion; go to India and ask about . . . their view of America. Go to China and ask.

"Now, no question parts of Europe have said that we shouldn't have gone to war in Iraq without a mandate, but those are a few countries. Most countries in Europe listened to what (U.N. Security Council Resolution) 1441 said, which is disclose, disarm or face serious consequences."

The president suggested that his critics are indulging in second-guessing as he discussed some of the controversial counterterrorism programs he put in place after the 9/11 attacks.

"What I would worry about is the Constitution of the United States and putting plans in place that makes it easier to find out what the enemy is thinking, because all these debates will matter not if there's another attack on the homeland," Bush said. "The

question won't be, you know, 'Were you critical of this plan or not'; the question is going to be, 'Why didn't you do something?'"

Advice for president-elect

Bush had a little advice for his successor, warning President-elect Barack Obama to expect criticism and be prepared that some of his "biggest disappointments will come from your so-called friends."

The president said he looked forward to his life after Jan. 20, when he will return to Texas to divide his time between a new home in Dallas and his ranch near Crawford, even though he admitted that he was not sure what to expect after eight years of being consumed by the presidency.

"I'm a Type A personality," Bush said. "I just can't envision myself, you know, the big straw hat and Hawaiian shirt sitting on some beach."

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