

# Tough tests lie ahead for Bush team

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With his honeymoon period drawing to a close, George W. Bush wants to show that behind the favorite new *Saturday Night Live* character, there is a serious man with a serious agenda. The opinion of a group of PSH faculty who recently led a panel discussion on the president's first 100 days in office was that although Bush and his team have fared rather well to this point, a difficult road may lie ahead.

On April 10, the follow-up to January's Inaugural Ball once again drew a large crowd (including a few students from Steelton-Highspire High School) to the Gallery Lounge for a look at where Bush's platform of compassionate conservatism may take the country.

Some new faces joined this panel which Dr. Jeremy Plant, professor of public administration and public policy, chaired. But the issues discussed were familiar. Dr. Vedula Murti, assistant professor of economics and statistics, shared his thoughts on Bush's plan for the economy, while Dr. Steven Melnick, associate professor of education, spoke about the president's vision for *America's schools*. Women's issues were once again addressed by Dr. Carol Nechemias, an associate professor of public policy and a member of the Steering Committee for the women's studies program. As coordinator of the public policy program, Dr. Robert Bresler shared his thoughts on Bush's leadership and relations with Congress; Dr. Steven Peterson, head of the school of public affairs, also explored these topics.

The panelists agreed that the 43rd president has fared better than expected in his early days in office, and some, like Nechemias, believe his administration may be more conservative than it first appeared. Still, Bush must concentrate his efforts in some key policy areas if he hopes to have a successful term and make another run at the White House in 2004.

Since economic performance often indicates an American politician's success, Bush's tax plan received much attention. His prescription for economic growth revolves around a \$1.6 trillion tax cut over 10 years, which includes a substantial reduction of personal income tax rates and elimination of estate taxes and the marriage penalty tax. But will this proposed overhaul give our economy the shot in the arm that some members of the popular press say it needs?

Murti says no. "Under Bush's plan, the wealthiest 1% of the population gets 40% of the tax relief. These people will

save, not spend. If you want to stimulate the economy, you should give a tax cut to the people who are going to spend it: low- and middle-income groups."

Murti also questions the equity of Bush's proposal since nearly 30 million Americans pay no federal income taxes because they earn too little. To make the plan more fair, Murti suggests raising the ceiling on taxable income while lowering the total amount of federal taxes. In other words, higher incomes mean higher taxes.

The real danger of Bush's budget proposal, said Murti, is that it just doesn't add up with the projected \$231 billion surplus. "You want to cut taxes, but assuming you also want to build up the military, have a prescription drug plan for the elderly and do something about education, there's not much left. What he said about Gore—fuzzy math—his estimate of the tax cut is nothing but fuzzy math," he said.

While the economy was one of the keys to Bush's campaign, education also

to narrow the achievement gap," Melnick said. "Those who do well get more federal bonus dollars. If objectives aren't met, federal funding is reduced."

Bush would give troubled districts extra financial and technical support for one year. If they did not improve after two years, parents could choose any public school within or outside their district. After three years, parents could send their children to any public, private or parochial school.

Besides wider school choice and more financial aid, Bush is lobbying hard for annual state testing in grades 3-8, which he believes would hold teachers to a higher standard. "Currently, no more than half of the states do any kind of testing because there are no standards," Melnick said. Bush also wants to raise the bar nationally. Current federal law mandates that the National Assessment of Educational Progress monitor samples of fourth graders and eighth graders biannually.

Although Bush has surprised Nechemias thus far by appointing women at relatively the same rate as Clinton did, concerns about women's issues dominated her remarks. She said that only anti-feminist groups and religious organizations that promote traditional Biblical values are truly pleased with Bush's election.

"Certain types of women's organizations are really not on the radar screen," she said, citing Bush's recent abolition of the White House Office for Women's Initiatives, which dealt with women's economic issues and domestic violence, among other issues.

Nechemias said Bush would favor a return to the "Mexico Rule." This would end U.S. federal aid to international groups that sponsor family planning and offer referrals or money for abortions. She also believes Bush would support partial-birth abortions, as well as limits on who could be prescribed the abortion pill RU486.

Perhaps most troubling to Nechemias is the Unborn Victims of Violence Act. If signed into law, this would make a fetus legally equal to its mother, even if the woman did not know she was pregnant. "This has all kinds of implications people often don't think about," said Nechemias. "Let's arrest women for smoking cigarettes, for example."

Bush faces many challenges in this country, but another big early test of his leadership and rhetorical skills comes from the tension between the U.S. and China. Though the Chinese government has agreed to release the 24 American military personnel, concern remains over the fate of their reconnaissance plane, which contains surveillance equipment with top-secret military information.

"We want China as a trading partner, but they have the second most powerful military in the world," said Peterson. Given the thorny nature of this problem, Peterson says it will be a big test of Bush's leadership and rhetorical skills.

Even though the president will face many challenges as his term continues, Peterson thinks Bush has done well in the early days. "George W. was very sensible in only introducing a few key initiatives early in his administration," he said. "The early tea leaves are fairly positive. He has set the agenda and the Democrats are responding."

Bresler's tone was positive yet cautious. "This is just a prelude," he said. "If he passes the big tests with the budget and the tax cut, he'll be OK. But the real heavy lifting, arm twisting and arm wrestling is just beginning."



Robert Bresler, Jerry Plant, Vedula Murti, Steve Melnick, Carol Nechemias and Steven Peterson (not pictured) evaluated George W. Bush's first 100 days in office on April 10.

ranked high on his list of presidential priorities. Just a decade ago, the Department of Education was headed for the chopping block as an example of wasteful government spending. But Bush has called for an 11.5% boost in its funding, and members of both major parties are backing their leader. His recipe for success in schools combines more rigorous standards for testing, curriculum and teacher accountability with plans to offer parents greater school choice. Bush also wants to establish educational savings accounts. This aspect of his proposal would allow parents to contribute up to \$5,000 tax free from kindergarten to higher education for their children.

Each of these initiatives shares a common ingredient: a healthy dose of competition. "States and schools would compete

Bush wants to conduct the sample yearly. Additionally, he wants to form partnerships between public schools and institutions of higher learning to boost student performance in math and science.

One audience member expressed some concern over Bush's call for faith-based after-school programs, but Melnick has no problem with them if they work. Where the tension comes in, he said, is in deciding how much federal money to devote to them.

Nechemias supports some of the president's educational goals, reducing class size and cracking down on school violence. Some other ideas worry her, though. "I'm afraid the money will end up being diverted from programs that could actually improve education and we'll just pour money into testing," she said.