
Candidates' Résumés

To the Editor:

Gov. George W. Bush's readiness to assume the presidency should indeed be judged on his "experience" as Texas governor and as a private-sector executive who has faced a measure of both failure and success (editorial, May 7). You say Texas has a "weak-governor system," but it is Vice President Al Gore and his supporters who unhesitatingly attribute Texas's policies on the environment, capital punishment, gun control and other matters to Mr. Bush.

As for Mr. Gore, any legislator or federal policy official is acquainted with a range of issues. But beyond casting votes in Congress, he does not appear ever to have occupied a position, public or private, where the "buck stops." Mr. Bush's experience as accountable decision maker, public and private, exceeds that of Mr. Gore, as well as that of Bill Clinton in 1992.

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The Experience Card

In a series of brisk exchanges last week, Vice President Al Gore and Gov. George W. Bush laid out their disagreements over gun control, foreign policy, tax cuts, Social Security and Mr. Bush's record in Texas. Perhaps because he is struggling to stay even with Mr. Bush in the polls, Mr. Gore was on the attack almost every day, using highly personal language to derogate his opponent's policies. The subtext, however, was not about policy. It was about experience and temperament. Mr. Gore, with his customary lack of subtlety, was suggesting that Mr. Bush is an untested leader with half-baked ideas. Stressing the value of experience is a time-honored strategy for the more seasoned candidate in presidential contests. But it comes with no guarantee of success. Otherwise we would never have had presidents named Carter, Reagan and Clinton.

Jimmy Carter has been on both sides of the experience strategy. He won as a new face in 1976, but when he tried in 1980 to depict the Republican challenger, Ronald Reagan, as unready for the White House, the tactic backfired. Mr. Reagan was a deft campaigner and debater who skillfully parried Mr. Carter's attempt to make him appear a lightweight. That bit of history bears a cautionary message for Mr. Gore. Even though the vice president is the best debater in presidential politics today, Mr. Bush could gain significantly with a better-than-expected performance. For now, he is arguing that the vice president's extreme attacks distort his record and insult the voters.

Down the road, however, he will have to engage Mr. Gore's points more directly. The vice president is right to raise questions about Mr. Bush's achievement in education, the environment, health care and budget issues. He may have exaggerated Mr. Bush's lack of budget experience, but his point that Texas has a weak-governor system is a valid one.

On foreign policy, Mr. Gore is also raising some fair questions about Mr. Bush, though there is a fine line between the license granted politicians who speak in generalities and outright distortion. The vice president accuses the governor of having a cold-war "mindset" that treats China and Russia as "enemies." Mr. Bush says he has gone out of his way to assert the contrary. But Mr. Bush would withdraw loans and credits to Russia over its crack-

down in Chechnya and abrogate the Antiballistic Missile Treaty. These two steps would be dangerously confrontational.

Even so, Mr. Gore goes too far in accusing Mr. Bush of being an isolationist. As his father's son, he would be heir to policies — and advisers — that are international in outlook. As for China's status as a trade partner, Mr. Bush's position is the same as that of the Clinton administration.

The arena where Mr. Gore has used his toughest language, surprisingly, is the budget. He repeatedly labels as perilous both the governor's \$1.3 trillion tax-cut plan and his proposal to carve private investment accounts out of the Social Security system. In fact, Mr. Gore's reliance on the word "risky" for almost every Bush proposal probably should inspire someone to send the vice president a thesaurus. His point, however, is right. The tax cut, which Mr. Gore says would actually cost more than \$2 trillion if you included the extra interest expenses from not paying down the debt, is ill-advised. And Mr. Bush has not addressed warnings from such stellar Republicans as Alan Greenspan that a big tax cut now could hurt the economy.

It is of course an exaggeration for Mr. Gore to say that Mr. Bush has a "secret plan" for Social Security. There is something to be said for Mr. Bush's not getting lost in details, as former Senator Bill Bradley did earlier this year on the health issue. But the governor needs to flesh out his ideas on Social Security privatization. He must also explain how he would pay for his tax cut and at the same time increase military and education spending without jeopardizing other vital programs.

There is a risk that the public could be turned off by bitter exchanges over policy minutiae and budget numbers. But such debates take the measure of the candidates. For Mr. Gore they reveal a policy aficionado who also has a gladiatorial instinct for verbal combat. For Mr. Bush they reveal someone who prefers to be aloof from detail, but who may not be able to pull that off with the ease of a Ronald Reagan. As the debate over experience continues, the candidates will be eyeing the polls for a reading on what the voters make of Mr. Bush's desire to float above the fray or Mr. Gore's desire to plunge into it.