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CIA leak trial, hospital scandal, Iraq war challenge public's ebbing faith in leaders

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Lies from the White House. Incompetence in treating wounded veterans. Irrelevance in Congress. Can't anybody do anything right? It is days like these that turn Americans sour on government, stoking a desire for leaders who actually lead.

Exhibit A is the perjury conviction of former vice presidential aide I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, whose trial cast unflattering light on the Bush White House and the mainstream media.

Exhibit B is the shameful treatment of wounded soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan at the flagship U.S. Army hospital, Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, and the likelihood that veterans care problems are systemic a national disgrace.

And let's not forget Iraq and Congress. Democrats and Republicans alike sometimes seem too busy posturing on the war to help win it or at least help get out of it.

The lack of leadership is a bipartisan pox.

"The public is dispirited about Washington," said independent pollster Andy Kohut of the Pew Research Center. "They're dispirited about their leaders."

This is a moment not unlike the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when government's fatally slow response caused Americans to question the competence of local, state and federal bureaucracies. Even worse was the lack of accountability from political leaders, including President George W. Bush.

Katrina destroyed the president's credibility and made many Americans wonder whether their faith in his Iraq policy was misplaced.

"It's the same story we saw with Katrina," said former House of Representatives leader Newt Gingrich, a potential 2008 Republican presidential candidate. "You have tired, obsolete bureaucracies with no performance standards and with an absolute belief that avoiding change is more important than succeeding."

He was referring to Walter Reed, the civilian bureaucracy in Baghdad and "a host of other national failures," ranging from the Detroit public schools to an overcrowded prison system in California. The Katrina-like pathology is also evident in the Libby case; the White House was so obsessed with Iraq war critics that senior advisers leaked the name of a CIA official, and one aide, Libby, lied about it under oath.

"Republicans want to protect President Bush even if it's not their bureaucracy that has failed," Gingrich said, "and Democrats don't want to criticize the bureaucracies because they just want to attack President Bush."

And nothing gets fixed.

It's no wonder that 78 percent of Americans said in a CNN Poll a few months ago that government is broken. And the public's lack of faith in leadership doesn't stop with the government.

Nearly three-quarters of Americans think U.S. society faces a "leadership crisis," according to a report by the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government late last year.

It tracked a loss of faith in the people who lead businesses, churches, schools and the media as well as federal, state and local governments.

In recent weeks, Americans saw an airline cripple itself during a bad storm (JetBlue), a powerful evangelical toppled in a sex scandal (the Rev. Ted Haggard), and journalists testifying in the Libby trial about their own lapses. Can't anybody do anything right?

Gingrich, among others, says the last great leadership crisis occurred around the turn of the 20th century. Like now, that was a time of massive economic and social change that left people feeling disconnected from their leaders.

"The country was going through the enormous change, and the political system just couldn't keep up with it," Gingrich said. "The rise of national railroads, huge industry and all sorts of huge things going on, and politics was mired in the trivial."

Out of this tumult came the Progressive Movement and leaders like Theodore Roosevelt who promised to rid politics of corruption and inefficiency, curtail the power of the business trusts and protect the general welfare of the public.

In the first years of this new century, Americans once again want a transformational leader.

Could it be an economic populist like Democrat John Edwards, who talks of two Americas? A self-styled maverick like Republican John McCain, who calls Americans to sacrifice and service? A fresh face like Democrat Barack Obama who promises to de-polarize politics?

Perhaps the agent of change is in the current field of 2008 presidential candidates, but nobody has seized the mantle so far.

"It's clear there's a growing frustration with leadership in politics and everything," said Democratic consultant Joe Trippi. "It started in the 1990s and has been growing with a fever pitch now with Libby being found guilty, Walter Reed and other stuff. Where the heck is leadership any leadership?"

That may be the single most relevant question of the 2008 race.

"Any party, or a third party, that actually broke out of this fog could really hit pay dirt with the American people," Trippi said.

EDITOR'S NOTE Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years.

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