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## Rove played a major role in Bush's successes and his failures, too

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Karl Rove deserves as much credit for spoiling George W. Bush's presidency as he does for creating it which is to say he had a lot to do with both.

The strategist's political genius helped make Bush president.

His arrogance helped make Bush a lame duck.

"Rove is the model for all future presidential advisers disciplined, smart and personally tight with the commander in chief. With that power comes all of the negative baggage when policy and governing failures erupt out of control," said Republican consultant Scott Reed. "He has kept remarkably cool as the GOP has spiraled out of control the last 10 months."

Reed was pointing to the 2006 midterm elections that cost Republicans control of Congress and destroyed any chance that Rove would achieve his driving ambition create a governing coalition that would outlast the Bush presidency.

That goal was on Rove's horizon in 2000, when he helped Bush overcome long odds to defeat a sitting vice president. Democrat Al Gore won the popular vote, but Bush won Florida and the majority of the electoral votes when the Supreme Court voted 5-4 to end the state's recount.

In the first summer of the presidency, Rove's polling showed that Bush was adrift politically that is until the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks galvanized the nation. It was Rove's idea to use 9/11 to sharpen the differences between Republicans and Democrats on national security, a hard-knuckled strategy that helped Republican gain seats in the 2002 elections despite a history of midterm losses by a president's party.

Rove stuck to his script in the 2004 re-election campaign, using the latest technologies to target and communicate with Republican-leaning voters who might otherwise stay home on Election Day or consider backing Democrats.

Bush, a disciplined candidate with a clear vision for his presidency, defeated Democrat John Kerry, a weak candidate with a fractious campaign.

In the days after the 2004 election, Rove laid claim to a durable Republican majority comparing the Bush-Kerry race to the elections of 1800, 1860, 1896 and 1932 when presidents leading during eras of great transition created new, lasting coalitions. Rove hoped to use Bush's policies on education, immigration, health care and Social Security to draw traditionally Democratic voters into the Republican fold.

Having already persuaded Congress to approve new education standards and expand the availability of health-savings accounts, Bush heeded Rove's advice and gambled second-term political capital on a plan to partially privatize Social Security.

It was a hugely unpopular idea that Rove kept pushing despite objections from Republicans in Congress a fierce display of the with-us-or-against-us mentality that the White House habitually deployed against friends and foes alike.

The fight over Social Security sapped Bush's political strength at a time when voters were growing sour on the Iraq war.

By now, Rove was both chief political strategist and deputy White House chief of staff in charge of both policy and politics, perhaps the most powerful White House aide ever.

"The problem for Karl was the art of campaigning required different talents than the art of governing," said Ken Duberstein, a Republican strategist who was President Reagan's last chief of staff.

"In the art of campaigning, it fundamentally has to do with defeating your opponent. The art of governing means you have to hold your opponent closely and continue to cultivate him or her for the next vote and the next vote and the next vote."

That was never Rove's style. His combative nature no doubt influenced what may have been Bush's biggest mistake using 9/11 to divide Democrats and Republicans rather than uniting the public behind a grand cause or shared sacrifice.

Rove's bullishness also guided his reaction to criticism leveled at Bush in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Rather than admit that the response was slow, Rove defended the federal government in dozens of e-mails fired off to lawmakers, fellow Republicans and journalists. "Get your ... down here and check it out yourself," read one, but with the vulgarity not deleted.

Younger aides fought against Rove to persuade Bush to accept more responsibility for Katrina and acknowledge obvious setbacks in Iraq. Bush's stubborn refusal undermined his credibility, which had been the core of his popularity.

Rove's own word came into doubt when a White House spokesman, after checking with him, denied that the strategist was involved in the leak of a CIA agent's identity. Turned out, Rove was one of the leakers.

Those who know him call Rove a great friend and family man who favors quiet acts of kindness over self-promotion a decent guy demonized by political enemies who, in many cases, had been demonized by Rove.

He was the perfect strategist for an imperfect era, when polarization and the pursuit of power often trumps common sense and decency.

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

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