

THE NEW ADMINISTRATION WILL ADMINISTER

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So it's over. George W. Bush will be the next president.

And the braying has begun: Oh, the partisan bitterness will prevent any effective action in Congress. Oh, the bickering will continue. Oh, the Democrats are out for blood aiming to do nothing more than capture both the House and the Senate in 2002. Oh, the Supreme Court is deeply fractured. (And more, get this: It is claimed that there was partisan behavior exhibited during the judicial phase of the election marathon!)

Therefore what? Either that's true or that's not true.

If it's true, what are the consequences? Not so much. After all, it has become an article of faith that politics is less important these days than it once was. If it is less important, it is the Congress that is principally less important. The major job of Congress deals with making new laws. If there are fewer new laws in the next two years, or four years, things just go on.

But things have been just going on. That's the essence of the Great Gridlock argument: Nothing happens, that is, nothing happens legislatively. (It is a much overstated view.) But, strange, as things have just gone on, the nation is doing better than ever. The economy has performed exceptionally well. The growth rate is now "slowing down" -- but down to levels that just a few years ago were regarded as quite fat. America remains the "sole surviving super-power." Extremist views got very little support: Ralph Nader got 3 percent of the vote, and Pat

Buchanan didn't seem to get any percentage at all.

Of course, it would be nice if President George W. Bush and the new Congress could agree on a few items and pass them into law. Perhaps we will get a prescription drug benefit for seniors that does not lead to price controls on drugs and consequent reduction in research and development by the pharmaceutical companies. Perhaps we could go toe-dipping into the world of partial privatization of Social Security, giving poor people the ability to accrue wealth.

And perhaps not. That will be no disaster for the president. The Constitution allows for the president to recommend legislation, but his principal job is not to pass new laws but to administer existing ones. That's why it's called "the administration." Moreover, or most over, he should try to inspire the nation -- not an easy job, but doable, as, most recently, Ronald Reagan showed.

Administering laws is no small matter, and the task has more than negligible effect. Bill Clinton has escalated the "executive order" to an art form. For example, appointing moderates to the various environmental agencies rather than green activists can bring some rationality to a process most Americans deem important. The same would be true in other regulatory agencies. A divided Senate means that the new President Bush will be unable to appoint "extremist" Justices to the Supreme Court, but if there was any evidence that he had that in mind, I would like to see it.

The president, of course, has enormous power in the realm of foreign policy, whether or not there is gridlock, partisanship, bitterness or simple vacuity

in the Congress. He is the commander in chief of American military forces.

I don't think President Clinton did a bad job on the foreign policy front, but if there was a coherent theme to his efforts it has eluded me, and near as I can tell, the rest of the world. That may not even have been his fault: A so-called "post-Cold War foreign policy" has been elusive to all.

Paul Wolfowitz, a senior foreign policy member of the former President Bush's team, had some pretty good ideas in the early 1990s. Wolfowitz has been an important advisor to the new president-elect and now seems to be in line for a high policy position in the new administration. We shall see.

Clinton's failure has been in the realm of inspiring America. Bush can do better, with a bickering Congress or a cooperative one. Given the events of the last few years, it would be hard to do worse.

Finally, don't worry too much about that "fractured" Supreme Court either. We've had that for three or four decades, and we've managed.

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