

"Mr. President: It's Not The Pay Records, It's Leadership!"

By Brent Filson

President Bush can redress a dismal performance on "Meet The Press" and at the same time score a leadership coup. The President should seize the initiative with his military service controversy by getting all records out immediately, not just the pay records, telling the truth about his military service and then using the bully pulpit of his office to deliver a heartfelt explanation of his actions.

The issue is not the pay records or quibbling about when he served or didn't serve. The issue is his leadership. As a leader who holds others accountable for their actions, the question now is does he hold himself accountable? If he keeps evading the question, he'll be the second one-term Bush President.

Clearly, leadership is vital to our national security. And leadership is going to be a burning issue in this campaign. From a leadership standpoint, President Bush's performance on *Meet The Press* was an embarrassment. He looked more like a college sophomore coerced into taking a communications course instead of the leader of the world's most powerful nation.

Instead of clearly and crisply articulating his positions, he was tongue-tied, evaded questions, seemed hesitant and nervous, and made vacillating arguments. Here's a man who's been accustomed to saying things speech writers put in his mouth before carefully chosen crowds, and it's coming back to haunt him. Being confronted by Tim Russert, President Bush found himself totally out of his element and in psychological free fall, a leadership disaster. But he can take comfort in an unwritten leadership law: there is opportunity in failure.

Look at Reagan after his disappointing performance in the first debate against Mondale. Reagan was just as tongue-tied, inarticulate, and bumbling as Bush. Yet Reagan got his act together and destroyed Mondale in the next debate. Bush can come back from the *Meet The Press* debacle if he shows great leadership. A good start to make would be to take one specific initiative and show courage and leadership with it. That initiative should be linked to the controversy over his military service.

During the Russert interview, he said he would release the records, but Russert practically had to drag it out of him. A good leader would have pounced on the issue as an opportunity, said (before Russert's prompting) "Let's make the records public", then after their release, gone on the attack. That would have shown him as decisive and honest. Nothing in those records is worse than his evading the issue. At the very least, he'll be showing courage, something he's asking the troops he's sent into Afghanistan and Iraqi to show each day.

Obviously, Bush's falling poll numbers caused panic in the White House and prompted either Bush or his handlers to choose the "Meet The Press" option. Just as obviously, they went into it totally unprepared. Sure, there are people who will vote for Bush no matter how badly he performs. And there are people who would never vote for Bush no matter how well he does. When assessing an election calculus, you can ignore those two groups. But this is going to be an extremely close election, decided by a group who can't be ignored, the independent-minded voters who look carefully at each candidate's leadership qualities. If Bush doesn't start projecting leadership in environments like Sunday's, his worst nightmare (one-term Bush II) will be realized.

© 2004 by Brent Filson

*Brent Filson is founder and president of The Filson Leadership Group, Inc. His latest leadership book is *The Leadership Talk: The Greatest Leadership Tool*. www.actionleadership.com*