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OP-ED COLUMNIST

A Mythic Reality

By PAUL KRUGMAN

The best book I've read about America after 9/11 isn't about either America or 9/11. It's "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning," an essay on the psychology of war by Chris Hedges, a veteran war correspondent. Better than any poll analysis or focus group, it explains why President Bush, despite policy failures at home and abroad, is ahead in the polls.

War, Mr. Hedges says, plays to some fundamental urges. "Lurking beneath the surface of every society, including ours," he says, "is the passionate yearning for a nationalist cause that exalts us, the kind that war alone is able to deliver." When war psychology takes hold, the public believes, temporarily, in a "mythic reality" in which our nation is purely good, our enemies are purely evil, and anyone who isn't our ally is our enemy.

This state of mind works greatly to the benefit of those in power.

One striking part of the book describes Argentina's reaction to the 1982 Falklands war. Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri, the leader of the country's military junta, cynically launched that war to distract the public from the failure of his economic policies. It worked: "The junta, which had been on the verge of collapse" just before the war, "instantly became the saviors of the country."

The point is that once war psychology takes hold, the public desperately wants to believe in its leadership, and ascribes heroic qualities to even the least deserving ruler. National adulation for the junta ended only after a humiliating military defeat.

George W. Bush isn't General Galtieri: America really was attacked on 9/11, and any president would have followed up with a counterstrike against the Taliban. Yet the Bush administration, like the Argentine junta, derived enormous political benefit from the impulse of a nation at war to rally around its leader.

Another president might have refrained from exploiting that surge of support for partisan gain; Mr. Bush didn't.

And his administration has sought to perpetuate the war psychology that makes such exploitation possible.

Step by step, the fight against Al Qaeda became a universal "war on terror," then a confrontation with the "axis of evil," then a war against all evil everywhere. Nobody knows where it all ends.

What is clear is that whenever political debate turns to Mr. Bush's actual record in office, his popularity sinks. Only by doing whatever it takes to change the subject to the war on terror - not to what he's actually doing about terrorist threats, but to his "leadership," whatever that means - can he get a bump in the polls.

Last week's convention made it clear that Mr. Bush intends to use what's left of his heroic image to win the election, and early polls suggest that the strategy may be working. What can John Kerry do?

Campaigning exclusively on domestic issues won't work. Mr. Bush must be held to account for his dismal record on jobs, health care and the environment. But as Mr. Hedges writes, when war psychology makes a public yearn to believe in its leaders, "there is little that logic or fact or truth can do to alter the experience."

To win, the Kerry campaign has to convince a significant number of voters that the self-proclaimed "war president" isn't an effective war leader - he only plays one on TV.

This charge has the virtue of being true. It's hard to find a nonpartisan national security analyst with a good word for the Bush administration's foreign policy. Iraq, in particular, is a slow-motion disaster brought on by wishful thinking, cronyism and epic incompetence.

If I were running the Kerry campaign, I'd remind people frequently about Mr. Bush's flight-suit photo-op, when he declared the end of major combat. In fact, the war goes on unabated. News coverage of Iraq dropped off sharply after the supposed transfer of sovereignty on June 28, but as many American soldiers have died since the transfer as in the original invasion.

And I'd point out that while Mr. Bush spared no effort preparing for his carrier landing - he even received underwater survival training in the White House pool - he didn't prepare for things that actually mattered, like securing and rebuilding Iraq after Baghdad fell.

Will it work? I don't know. But to win, Mr. Kerry must try to puncture the myth that Mr. Bush's handlers have so assiduously created.