Bush spin doctors flip between hands-on and hands-off image
By Dick Polman

The fog of war is enshrouding the commander-in-chief. It is virtually impossible these days to determine the true demeanor and behavior of the President in wartime.

The press secretary says that George W. Bush is "very comfortable... very steady," and sleeping well. But an associate says that Bush is "burdened," and feeling the strain.

The press secretary says that Bush stays above the fray and has little interest in the TV coverage. But a close friend says that Bush is engrossed in the war details and "totally immersed" in the TV coverage.

A magazine with a pipeline to the White House says that Bush is a hands-on guy who doesn't "defer to the expertise of military brass." But the press secretary says that "when it comes to running the war, the President believes that it's best left in the hands of the people who are expert at running the war."

There's a reason these clashing factoids are being generated: The Bush team, mindful that it has pegged its political fortunes to the success of this war and its aftermath, is searching for the perfectly calibrated wartime presidential image - more engaged in the details than, say, Ronald Reagan, but definitely less obsessed than Vietnam micromanager Lyndon Johnson.

"It's really an ongoing process," said Fred Greenstein, author of eight books on the presidency. "They want to convey that he's relaxed, but full of resolve. That he's a detached CEO, but also running the show. His dad's team didn't have this level of spin management. This is an administration that pays enormous attention to the cosmetics of presentation."

And no wonder, consider the stakes. Joseph Cirincione, a foreign-policy analyst and former staffer on the House Armed Services Committee, says: "Three years ago, [Bush] didn't know much of anything about foreign policy, by his own admission - and now here he is, post-Sept. 11, leading a war that is unprecedented in our history."

The verdict on his wartime leadership can be rendered only with hindsight. We aren't likely to know for many years whether victory in Iraq will bring peace and democracy to the Middle East. And we probably won't know - until administration papers are declassified - how, when and why Bush decided to embrace the neoconservative blueprint for a preventive war waged largely in defiance of world opinion.

In the meantime, "the cosmetics of presentation" matter greatly. Presidential historian Allan Lichtman says: "Domestic opinion management is a critical part of any war," and that starts with the leader's image.

Hence, the Bush team's oscillation between "hands-on" and "hands-off." For example, while Bush is described as generally willing to let the Pentagon call the shots on fighting the war (and take the heat for Bush during the early disputes that have arisen over the war plan), aides have hastened to say that he is briefed every morning.

Americans generally view their wartime presidents as hands-on leaders. Abraham Lincoln spent his days at the War Department, reading the telegraph messages, also, he hired and fired his generals. Franklin D. Roosevelt pored over battle maps with Winston Churchill - and ordered the invasion of North Africa in 1942, over fervent military opposition, because he wanted to boost home-front morale.

But aides are also anxious to say that Bush isn't overdosing on details, that he won't provide "play-by-play commentary" on the war. In other words, they don't want Bush to

personalize this war, the way LBJ personalized Vietnam. Johnson used to haunt the Situation Room in his pajamas during the wee hours, picking the bomb targets. In the winter of 1965, he even told an aide: "I've got to make this my war."

Robert Dallek, a Johnson biographer, says: "The current President doesn't want the Iraqi war to be known as 'Bush's war.' He wants it to be seen as 'America's war.' That's where Johnson failed. That was a big reason why he got into such deep trouble with the public."

As a wartime president anxious to stoke domestic support, Johnson was also a poor communicator. Bush is not. Analysts say that though Bush lacks the eloquence that came more naturally to Lincoln and FDR, he has maximized other assets.

Stephen Hess, a White House aide to Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, says: "Bush's big strength is staying on message, in a plainspoken way. In press conferences, he has made the same points about Saddam and terrorism over and over again. That might frustrate the political junkies, and it may not work in Berkeley and Cambridge, but it connects with Main Street. To a nation that isn't very political, and doesn't tune in to a president very often, repetition is very useful."

Cirincione agrees, but with a caveat: "Bush's aim was to link Hussein and bin Laden. He kept repeating it like it was 'drink Coca-Cola,' until the people bought it, to the point where almost half' - 42 percent, in a national poll - "now believe that Saddam was personally responsible for Sept. 11. Which not even the White House has ever tried to suggest."

Sept. 1 1 is crucial. Unlike Johnson, who labored to sell the Domino Theory (if Vietnam falls, Southeast Asia turns communist) to an increasingly wary public, Bush's public is more attuned to the national-security argument, having already weathered the first foreign attack on New York City since 1776.

Yet despite Bush's success as a wartime communicator, the White House still seems consumed by image management. And sometimes it backfires.

On March 21, press secretary Ari Fleischer, eager to imply that Bush was not overly engaged, said his boss watched TV war coverage "occasionally... from time to time." But when Bush heard this characterization, he laughed - because he was watching TV at the time, with a close friend, Roland Betts, who later told reporters that Bush was "totally immersed" in the coverage.

Others have pushed the immersion theory; on Wednesday, *USA Today* quoted "friends and aides" as saying that the war was weighing heavily on Bush, and that he was "burdened." But Fleischer said later that these people were wrong, that Bush instead felt "comfortable," and besides, "I don't know how to define what the word *burdened* means."

The White House prefers to characterize Bush as only semi-immersed. And that image has helped to distance him from the public spat - stoked by military experts and some active officers - over whether the administration has been fighting with too few troops. Bush speaks on the war aims; when the war-making details are disputed, subordinates take the hits.

On Tuesday, a reporter asked Fleischer whether Bush had "taken any role in calling anybody" about the war-plan dispute.

Fleischer said: "I don't think the President is bothering on that level." He said the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard Myers, had already "authoritatively" defended the plan, "so many layers down."

This is smart politics. Hess, the ex-White House aide, says: "It was the same thing with Eisenhower. You insulate the CEO. Whenever something went wrong in the world, people always focused on [Secretary of State] John Foster Dulles. There was always somebody who would stand between Ike and political liability."

But though Bush looks good to most Americans today, the play of events will frame his historical reputation. If America democratizes a peaceful Middle East, he may well be lionized.

If America suffers in a long occupation that inflames the region, he won't be.

Lichtman, the presidential historian, says: "Americans are pragmatic, and they judge wartime leaders on results. Victory is its own justification. Defeat is its own detriment."

The Philadelphia Inquirer
April 6, 2003