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LONDON: If you are interested in who's going to be the next US president then forget the precedents. If history is anything to go by, both John Kerry and George Bush will win. No candidate who lost the popular vote but won the presidency (John Quincy Adams, 1824; Rutherford B Hayes 1876; Benjamin Harrison, 1888; George Bush, 2000) has ever been re-elected. But then no president has failed to be re-elected during a major war.

Since 1964, every incumbent with approval ratings below 50% in the spring of the year when they are running for re-election, which would include Bush, has lost. But then every incumbent who has had an approval rating above 50% at this stage, which would include Bush, has won. The truth is that nobody can predict the outcome of the presidential election. The polls are too volatile, the margins too close and the context in which they are being conducted too precarious.

Anything from a large mortar attack in Iraq that kills several US sol-

diers (Iraqi casualties appear to have little impact on US public opinion) to a plant closure in Ohio could tip the balance either way.

Kerry has started to bounce back, helped in part by a strong debate performance. But for now, Bush is the narrow favourite. That forces the rest of us to wrestle with the prospect of four more years of the most rightwing administration most can remember. What should the world make of America and Americans if Bush wins?

In 2000, such a prospect was unpleasant but far less alarming. If anything, the world was more concerned by his unilateral withdrawal from the global arena (renewing on treaties like Kyoto) than his unilateral intervention into it. Moreover, the manner in which Bush assumed power — selected by judges rather than elected by people — denied him absolute legitimacy in the world's eyes and helped us differentiate him from the people he claimed to represent.

This time things are different. Since September 11 2001, Americans have

been forced to take a closer look at the world around them. Over the past two years they have seen their government prosecute an illegal war in a nation where they are unwelcome occupiers and flout the will of the UN, and their soldiers torture Iraqis in Abu Ghraib prison. In short, they have seen loathing for their country grow around the globe — even among those they once counted as allies — and more than a thousand of their countrymen killed in combat. If they lost their innocence on September 11 — never a particularly convincing assertion — then they cannot have it back now.

If Bush wins fair and square on November 2, then what conclusions can we draw about a nation that consciously decides this is the course it wants to take? We might start by ruling out a few. First, it will not mean that Americans are stupid. They aren't. Compared with the rest of the world, they are pretty well educated and certainly no more stupid than Britons, French or Portuguese were when they had an empire. Nor will it

is at war with itself

DAWN

By Gary Younge

mean they have been duped. They haven't. They have been lied to constantly and their mainstream media has served them poorly, particularly over weapons of mass destruction, the connection between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, and the Middle East.

But in a nation where the internet is widely available, and films, books and radio stations present other opinions, Americans have had access to a wide range of viewpoints, including Howard Dean and Michael Moore. True, dissident voices have been marginalized. But they have not been extinguished — and, if anything, have grown more mainstream in the past year. So if Americans come away from the plurality of opinions with which they have been presented to back Bush, it will not be because they did not know that other views were out there, but because they chose to believe one set of views over others.

The question is, why? Partly because they have not been presented with much of an electoral alternative.

The choice, come November 2, is between a man who prosecuted the war and a man who voted for him to do so. Indeed, Kerry's polling numbers have only started climbing since he began putting a distance between himself and Bush on the war, as he did during the debate.

The US is not exceptional in this regard. Across the western world people are facing unpalatable electoral choices. In the French presidential election run-off between Chirac and Le Pen, opponents of the incumbent urged voters to support "the crook, not the fascist". In Germany, recent regional elections show a huge increase in support for neo-Nazis and former communists, and a slump in backing for the two main parties. In Britain, we have Tony Blair or Conservative leader Michael Howard — two men who supported the war while most of the country did not. But given America's huge military capability and the administration's trigger-happy instincts, the stakes for the rest of the world — even with such a poor choice — are far higher than else-

where.

Then there is fear — Bush's invisible running mate. Republicans have explicitly claimed that the US will get hit again if Kerry wins. "Weakness invites those who would do us harm," says one radio ad, broadcast last week in the swing states. The Democrats are now at it too. In the past few weeks, they have argued that a second Bush term could cause more casualties, another Vietnam in Iraq, a military draft, a secret call-up of reservists and even a nuclear attack against the US.

More than anything else, though, a Bush victory would suggest that when given a choice between leading the world through force or through consensus (the notion that America should not lead the world has not arisen), most of those who expressed a preference preferred force. It will indicate a desire to preserve the nation's military, economic and diplomatic hegemony and the cheap oil and protected industries it brings. In short, given a choice between being powerful and being safe, the

Americans will have chosen power. They will have decided that global supremacy is more important to them than being either liked or respected.

But at the same time, it is important to remember that, given the relatively low turnouts and slim margins, a majority of those who expressed a preference will still be a minority of American people. The Bush agenda has also energized a huge section of the country which opposes him and that is every bit as vocal as those who back him.

The country is riven on almost every axis possible — between red states (for Bush) and blue states (for Kerry) — between the religious and the secular, the metro and the retro. "Not since the Civil War has the country been so divided," argues John White, professor of politics at the Catholic University of America. Whether Bush wins or loses, these rifts will endure. America is not just a nation at war with the world; it is a nation at war with itself.—*Dawn/The Guardian News Service.*