

Fate in the balance

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further drained the US Treasury.

Like Mr Bush, Mr Kerry also has not offered a plan to cope with retirement and health costs, but he promises more fiscal realism. He sensibly proposes to reverse Mr Bush's tax cuts on the wealthiest and pledges to scale back his own spending proposals if funds don't suffice. He would seek to restore budget discipline rules that helped get deficits under control in the 1990s.

But there are entries in Mr Kerry's resume that may turn away many conservative voters from him, the most notably being his opposition to the wars in Vietnam and the First Persian Gulf War. But he did support the use of American force in Bosnia and Kosovo.

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Mr Kerry is also accused of being indecisive. His critics say that he seeks a range of opinions before taking a decision, but his decisions do not always reflect the wisdom of his advisers.

Conservative circles also blame him for not being clear on Iraq. They say that he voted for the war, but then opposed invasion. He was not clear about the threat Saddam Hussein posed to the United States and his description of the war as a mistake may further dishearten an already feeble alliance that America is leading in Iraq.

But his supporters say that Mr Kerry did approve Saddam's removal although he did not believe he was a direct threat to the United States or had links to Al Qaeda. They point out that he has promised not to cut and run from Iraq and is

more capable than Mr Bush of building a strong international coalition for Iraq.

The supporters say that Mr Kerry is more committed than Mr Bush to fighting nuclear proliferation and will be more effective than the current president in preventing terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

On November 2, American voters will have to choose which of the two candidates will serve their interests better both at home and abroad. There is a worryingly large gap between Mr Bush's visions, and the reality of the way he has run things in Iraq and in the US economy over the past four years.

The real question on November 2 is whether American voters will go with Mr Bush's big dreams and grand strategies, hoping that his tactics and his record of governance will somehow catch up, or whether they will want to replace him with someone they think is better equipped to lead them for the next four years. ■