

## Blame hubris, election cycle

Robert H. "Robin" Dorff serves as executive director of the Institute of Political Leadership, based in Raleigh. Here are excerpts from a recent interview:

THE N&O: Do you see any common themes in the scandals or problems that recent presidents have encountered in their second terms?

ROBIN DORFF: I don't think there are necessarily common themes in the nature of the scandals or problems, per se, but I think there are some common themes in terms of actors and forces that underlie them and that make the second term very difficult for presidents and also at times do lead to crises and concerns and even scandals.

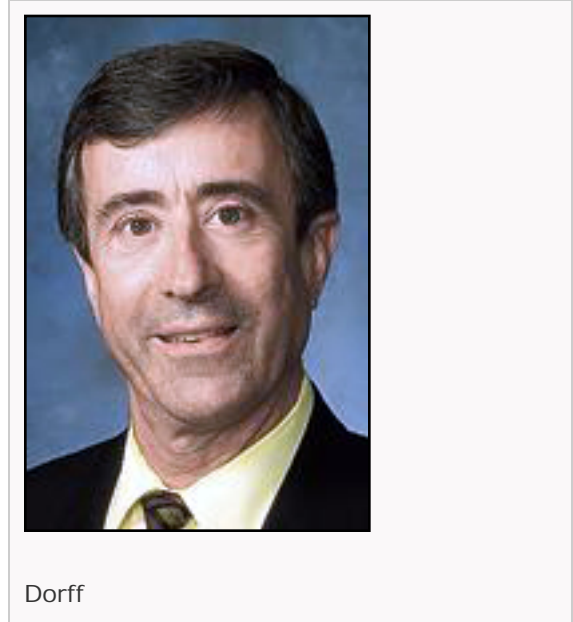
THE N&O: What are those?

DORFF: There are generally two. One is related to the election cycle itself and the second is related to the nature of the second term, and both are related. The nature of the election cycle is essentially once the president has been re-elected, he becomes a lame-duck president, and as a consequence, the ability of the president to get his way on a number of important agendas, both domestic and foreign, becomes that much more difficult.

The other piece is that administrations that get re-elected -- the staff as well as the individual president -- do have a tendency to perhaps overstate the amount of power in what they do and in some cases what they can get away with, because they have been re-elected and often do tend to enjoy that burst of popularity following that re-election. And that tends to create some problems. Some of that is hubris, thinking that you can get away with some things that perhaps are best not tried.

There's also a personnel dimension to it. The second term often leads to changes in key staff in administrative positions. So some of the more trusted advisers and the more experienced administrators depart at the end of the first term and beginning of the second term. So often you do see losses of key personnel also leading perhaps to poor judgment calls.

THE N&O: What do you think the problem is with the Bush administration?



DORFF: I think the problem with the Bush administration is a little bit of both of those. The president was very aggressive with a domestic agenda, Social Security reform, being out front on that -- as he said, investing a lot of political capital in that. When you use a lot of political capital in one thing, you're not investing it somewhere else.

I think, secondly, the president overestimated, particularly in the Supreme Court appointment case of Harriet Miers. I think he and his staff misread the political environment and thought that their popularity and relative strength could make it smooth sailing even against some opposition from their own Republican base.

THE N&O: Do you think that President Bush is going to be able to right himself?

DORFF: I certainly think he can. I think it's going to require some very careful steps. I'm not a presidential adviser, but I think oftentimes in politics, perception is reality. And you have to address the perception as much if not more so than the reality. And I think right now there is a growing perception there are some staff problems in the White House and more broadly in the administration, and I expect that he probably really needs to address that.

THE N&O: And you think he'll be able to?

DORFF: It's certainly not the case at this point that it is unfixable. There are a lot of things that he doesn't control, and it would be hard for him to affect, but given some bold moves, perhaps with a staff shakeup, with some improving economic news and perhaps some good news and maybe some key policy developments on the foreign policy front, I'm sure the president could turn things around.

But all of those things aren't in his control. The things that are, are the ones he really has to act on near term. The perception that the White House is not in control has to be addressed. And I think he is probably going to have to figure out how to work with his core Republican base and not appear to be kowtowing to them.

THE N&O: In a sense, every president runs into problems, and if they're severe in the first term, he just doesn't get re-elected. Maybe it isn't a second-term jinx but that every president has problems.

DORFF: It's a good point. A number of the problems the president is facing today are problems that had their origin in the first term. The classic example of the second-term crisis, Richard Nixon's Watergate, was obviously something that grew out of the first term. It was related to the election, of course. Bill Clinton's problems had their origin in the first term.

So I don't think it's correct to say that there is a second-term jinx. There are some things that do make the second term more difficult for the president, but there is nothing inherent in that they have to wander into a crisis or scandal.

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