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Where Does the Buck Stop?

By Kenneth W. Stein

If you are emotionally tied to President Bush's candidacy, don't read this column. It is not about John Kerry, but it is about some of the Bush Administration's egregious foreign policy failures. And it asks whether the American electorate will hold its leadership accountable as the Israeli public held its leaders responsible for the intelligence failures that led to the Yom Kippur War.

A day before the surprise Egyptian-Syrian attack on Israel on Oct. 6, 1973, Israel's military intelligence chief reported that "the opening of military operations against Israel by the two [Arab] armies was a low probability."

Twice before the war started, a junior Israeli military intelligence officer argued that vast Egyptian deployments along the Suez Canal "seemed to camouflage an assault." But his superiors dismissed that assessment because the analyst did not agree with the arrogantly held Israeli belief that neither Syria nor Egypt had the capability to wage a war against Israel.

So what happened? During the first week of that October War, more than 2,000 Israeli soldiers died. The commission that investigated Israel's intelligence failures reported that the government failed to read the available intelligence properly and thus had failed to anticipate the Arab attack.

In hindsight, Israel possessed accurate information and astute analyses, but its policy-makers dismissed these estimates—even though Jordan's King Hussein met secretly with Prime Minister Golda Meir 10 days before the war broke out and told her it was coming. Public pressure later forced both Meir and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan to resign. The country was devastated.

Fast-forward to today. The 9/11 Commission has found that there was a chain of missed opportunities that might have prevented the attacks.

For one thing, there was the August 2001 presidential briefing memo suggesting that al-Qaeda was planning to attack the United States, information that Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security advisor,

dismissed as “historical information based on old reporting.”

After 9/11, the administration held that removing Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was part of the “war on terrorism” and an extension of retaliation against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

No one doubts that Saddam Hussein was brutal. But to justify the invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration intentionally provided erroneous information to the Senate, the American people, the United Nations and to its allies. No wonder that the Senate voted to use force against Iraq; senators were fed wrong information.

As far as terrorism is concerned, the bipartisan evidence is overwhelming: The Bush Administration suffered from conceptual myopia, mishandled intelligence data, lied in justifying war against Iraq and sent poorly prepared troops to war.

What has happened? Almost 3,000 Americans died on 9/11 and more than 1,000 soldiers have died in Iraq. Traditional friends are alienated not against America but against this administration. Most Americans do not feel safer, and terrorism has not been defeated.

Most American voters usually place less emphasis on foreign policy issues and more importance on economic and social issues. This year, I’m voting on performance: If Israeli leaders, Martha Stewart, Catholic priests and Enron executives are to be held responsible for their actions, so should the president of the United States.