

'I screwed up' - now there's real change

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Thursday, February 5, 2009

National news anchors and reporters said President Obama had a bad day Tuesday, when his nomination of Republican New Hampshire Sen. Judd Gregg as commerce secretary was overshadowed by the collapse of two troubled nominations. But how many Americans agree that hearing a president admit error makes for a bad day?

After eight years of an administration marked by serial bungling but led by a man who studiously avoided conceding mistakes, there is something mighty refreshing in hearing the president of the United States take credit for anything having gone wrong.

And Obama did it not once, but repeatedly, in televised interviews with five network anchors.

"I screwed up," the president said in one interview after another, taking responsibility for the withdrawal of two nominees whose trouble paying taxes caused them to spare him further embarrassment.

In truth, Obama was overly generous in taking full responsibility for the errors of Tom Daschle, his choice to reform health care as secretary of Health and Human Services, and Nancy Killefer, whom he tapped to oversee executive branch performance. Their failure to pay their full share of taxes was their own doing. And Daschle at least had also failed to notify the president of that during the vetting process preceding his nomination.

Obama's error was in continuing to support both nominees after they were tarnished by disclosure of their tax troubles. But there again, the comparison with his predecessor is unavoidable.

President Bush, like Obama, was loyal to his people to a fault. But in Bush's case, protracted loyalty cost the country plenty, including in lives. He kept Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld in his post long after Rumsfeld's failure to prepare for an insurgency in Iraq, and failure to respond to it when it appeared, drove the occupied nation to near-civil war.

Even as the 2006 election approached and voters prepared to deliver Bush's party a stunning rebuke at the polls, Bush defended Rumsfeld as the right person for the

job. The day after Election Day, he replaced Rumsfeld with Bob Gates, but still refused to admit error.

In recent weeks, after an even sterner repudiation at the polls, Bush finally conceded some mistakes, but only minor ones. He said appearing under a banner reading "Mission Accomplished" just as Iraq was to start descending into bloody chaos wasn't too wise, and maybe he shouldn't have said, "Bring 'em on" regarding Iraqi insurgents.

But about the war itself, and the debt he produced while promising balanced budgets, and the ineptitude in responding to Hurricane Katrina, and the official torture policy for which he prosecuted a few enlisted service people, he offered only defense.

How much better might the American people feel about Bush today if he only had the courage to say what Obama said Tuesday? Seen that way, Obama had a better day Tuesday than Bush ever had. - J.F.