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Bush Demonstrating Confidence Speaking

Monday, February 28, 2005

By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

FOX NEWS

WASHINGTON — After four years of "misunderestimation," some say President Bush has finally settled into a public speaking persona that is both confident and relaxed.

"Yes, I do think he's hit his stride as a public speaker," said Suzanne Bates, former television news reporter and now president and CEO of Bates-Communications in Boston.

Some viewers of the president's **State of the Union** ([search](#)) speech on Feb. 2 remarked on the seeming spring in his step as he launched onto the podium and into a well-delivered address. Others say his press conferences seem less strained and his rally for Social Security reform shows a comfortable, self-assured president on a mission. He also earned points for a polished performance during his trip to Europe last week.

"There's no doubt in my mind there's a difference," said Terry Madonna, director of the **Center for Politics and Public Affairs** ([search](#)) at Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania. "He's very relaxed and he has a lot of self-confidence."

But that's not to say Bush is a world-class speaker.

"In the first term, he was stiff. When he looked at the teleprompter, he sort of had that frozen look in his eyes," said T.J. Walker, founder of **TJWalker Media** ([search](#)), which helps corporate-types with their communication skills. Now, "he's more comfortable. He'll never go down in history as the best communicator or the great communicator. But I would say you could make the case he's the most improved communicator in the White House."

Several public speaking experts interviewed by FOXNews.com say a myriad of reasons could explain the change that has come over the president, who has often been taken to task for his mangling of words and phrases, and sometimes awkward exchanges with reporters.

The biggest reason, all agree, is that he never has to run for re-election again.

"I think a lot of it has to do with experience, a lot of it may have to do with his religious calling ... and maybe because he's on the homestretch and he has nothing left to prove here," said Charlene Handford Barlow, a communications professor specializing in public speaking at Louisiana State University at Shreveport.

"He was certainly, as far as I was concerned, a very inept public speaker. I think he is probably someone who is – and I've never met him – probably better at the one-on-one," said Barlow. "He's done a lot of things a public speaking teacher would say not to do."

However, after the election, "he has improved, and that probably comes from the fact that he is more comfortable with his positions," she said, particularly his belief that in part, his vision for spreading democracy throughout the world is sanctioned by God, ratifying his faith, and he is comfortable talking about that.

"I think he's come into his own," Barlow added.

Not everyone sees such a tremendous change, however.

"I do think early in the presidency there was some question of him as a public speaker, but he delivers a very good speech and a very good stump speech, and in press conferences he doesn't seem as confident " said John Fortier, politics expert at the **American Enterprise Institute** ([search](#)). "I'm not sure there's been much of a change."

Joel Hochberger, president of **Effective Strategies, Inc.** ([search](#)), a firm specializing in enhancing public speaking skills for clients in Illinois, said the fact that Bush is commanding the agenda, with issues obviously important to him, has had an effect on his appearances.

"He's better because he's talking about things he really believes in," he said, noting that Bush "is no actor," and at previous times seemed not to have a great command of the subject matter, particularly when reporters' questions veered into uncharted territory.

These days, talking about Social Security and "ownership" at home, and democracy abroad, Bush seems to be more in charge, added Hochberger.

Bates, who coaches executives and politicians in public speaking and is about to release a book, "Speak Like a CEO," said Bush's "inner compass" and authenticity have been enhanced by a more polished delivery.

"He didn't change as a person or a presenter," she said. "He's still himself, he still has all the things that make George Bush George Bush – he's just more fluid."

Carol Tarantola, a public speaking professor at Wyoming University, pointed out that until now, Bush displayed many of the classic signs of a speaker keenly aware of his limitations, and as a result, often seemed insecure, causing more of the obvious fumbling upon which the media like to feast.

"When people make fun of you and notice your idiosyncrasies, you feel less confident and make more mistakes," she said. "Now that he has his mandate, or whatever you call it, and is in his second term, he's going to do it his way."

And so far, "I've definitely noticed a difference in his public speaking," added Tarantola, who thinks much coaching and practice and a decisive victory under his belt has definitely helped.

"I think he's definitely been coached, and he's making more effort to articulate words," she said. "He's had a very unusual speech pattern and people have noticed that ... but I have noticed that he is much more careful with that now."

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