

**THE BLOG****Knee-Jerk Jerks**

By Marty Kaplan

02/16/2006 11:03 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

When you look at what most counts in our national leaders — their native instincts in times of true crisis — the campaigns that elect them are jokes, circus sideshows that tell us next to nothing we need to know.

Forget the argument that candidates' ability to respond to pop questions during debates, or how they thrust and parry during ad wars, reliably foreshadows what their performance as executives will be. The pseudo-events of campaigns teach us pitifully little about what their reflexes will be like when it really counts.

By now our nation has lived through one terrible example after another of the Bush Administration's hapless hard-wiring.

When presented with the news of the World Trade Center attack, the President froze in the headlights.

When the toppling of Saddam was followed immediately by anarchy, the President and his Secretary of Defense were blind to obvious evidence of the failure of their post-war plan.

When Katrina destroyed New Orleans, the President and his Secretary of Homeland Security saw no reason to alter their photo-op and speech plans.

When Dick Cheney shot a man, his instinct was to deal with it the way a tyrant would, or a feudal baron, rather than as a public servant with public responsibilities.

This crowd does not lack political war-room skills. Bush's return from vacation for the midnight signing of the preposterous Terri Schiavo bill proves that they know the value of stunts and symbols.

But in the crunch — when crisis reveals character, and values are flushed from the covey — we now know all too well what these people are truly made of.

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