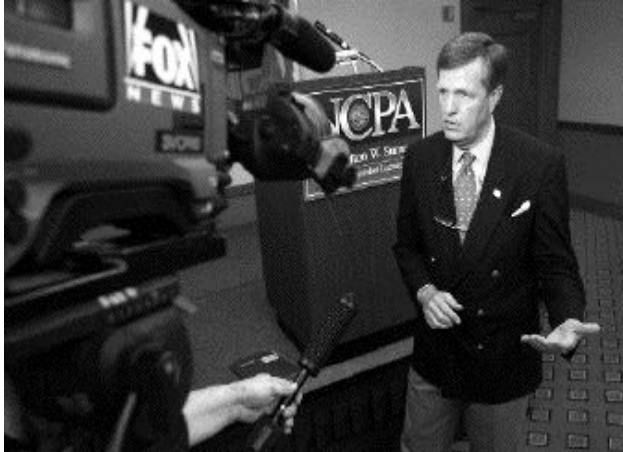


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U.S. political atmosphere worst since Nixon, Fox anchor says

By Bill Miller

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DALLAS - If politics in Washington, D.C., seem especially rancorous to you lately, Fox News anchor Brit Hume would agree, but he also offers this tip: It's about to get much worse.

Hume, Fox News' Washington managing editor, was in Dallas on Tuesday for the **Hatton W. Sumners Distinguished Lecture Series** luncheon by the **National Center for Policy Analysis**.

"The political atmosphere in Washington is as poisonous as I've ever seen it," Hume told his audience at the Adam's Mark Hotel. "It's at least as bad, if not more so than the days leading to the resignation of Richard Nixon, and those days were bad."

Hume, who anchors *Special Report with Brit Hume*, said the roots of the discord go back to the 2000 election, when Democrats were outraged that George W. Bush landed in the Oval Office instead of Al Gore.

Since it was a messy victory, Hume said Democrats expected Bush "to govern as a sort of 'compromise president.'" But, he added, "Bush decided that he may not have had more than 50 percent of the vote, but he did have 100 percent of the presidency, and that's how he has governed."

Hume noted that the bitterness was briefly tempered by the national unity that grew out of the Sept. 11 attacks and the subsequent military successes in Afghanistan. He said the president even won tax cuts.

Hume explained, however, that the good will evaporated when the administration decided to invade Iraq by focusing on a theory that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. To date, no weapons have been found.

But Hume added that the president's detractors were further outraged that he went into Iraq without support from other nations.

"This was the moment that changed everything in Washington," Hume said. "They believed this president had arrogantly declined to govern as a centrist, and that he had now taken us into an illegitimate war.

"It's that bitterness which led right into the 2004 election."

Hume predicted that the unabated anger will highlight the showdown over who will replace ailing Chief Justice William Rehnquist, once the Supreme Court's top jurist leaves the court.

"We will see a fight like we've rarely ever seen," Hume said. "There are further fireworks ahead."

Hume joined FOX in 1996 after working 23 years for ABC News. He said his network, with its slogan "Fair and Balanced," has the reputation for being conservative only because it doesn't have the "left-wing tilt" that "people on the American left have become kind of accustomed to."

"But," he added, "we kind of had a choice when we started. We could be popular and beloved by a lot of people, and a lot of people in the news media, or we could be first. We couldn't be both.

"I think we made the right choice."