

Arrogant Denial: A Literature Review of Recent Evaluations of the Bush Presidency

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You aren't going to be a successful diplomat if you don't understand the strategic context in which you are actually negotiating. It is not deal making. It's not. Instead...it was a matter of waiting until the underlying conditions were right, and then acting.

Condoleezza Rice

Quoted in Glenn Kessler, *The Confidante*

How does one understand the Bush presidency? It has been one of the most controversial and analytically rich periods of American politics, both foreign and domestic, and the reason for this attraction lies in the character of one man and the intricate relationships between him and his staff. The administration of George W. Bush created a personality of its own that started to define itself at the core of the Republican Party during his 2000 primary campaign and was confirmed with the September 11 terrorist attacks.

On the verge of the 2008 presidential elections in the United States, it seems appropriate to evaluate the Bush presidency beyond its many political failures, its dogmatic decision-making processes, and its reliance upon flawed intelligence. Understanding the forty-third president as a complicated human being may not justify the poor decisions he made, but it may help us to comprehend better the rationale behind his agenda.

The most frequent evaluations of the Bush presidency have been negative. Already, he is sometimes portrayed as the worst president in

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U.S. history. But, ironically, this judgment offers attractive scenarios for analyzing several political phenomena. The war on terrorism and the Iraq adventure provide examples of the unique way in which the executive-legislative balance of power, the national standing of the presidency, the power of strong personal characters, the attachment to categorically conservative principles (including in terms of his concept of “compassionate conservatism”), and, especially, the role of the United States in world politics (even on the edge of a hegemonic crisis) can be understood in terms of strong domestic dynamics.

Perhaps George W. Bush’s character (as a complement to his beliefs and principles) has been one of the most attractive features for journalists and analysts when trying to understand the outcome of the political equation that is the Bush presidency. In fact, traditionally, analyses of U.S. politics have relied on character studies. Even U.S. political parties have resorted to identities associated with well defined kinds of social character that tend to be crucial for developing a relationship between themselves and their constituents.

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Robert Draper takes these characteristics beyond the superficial judgment of the personal life of George W. Bush, beyond his relationship with the forty-first president, and beyond his defining past and his conservative background and lifestyle. This particular journalist gets into the labyrinth of the Bush personality to a degree that allows him to develop a certain distant empathy. With unprecedented access to the president in six interviews, from December 2006 to May 2007, the *GQ Magazine* national correspondent and *Texas Monthly* senior editor delivers a personality-based assessment of George W. Bush’s presidential journey through a chain of anecdotes and character details, some of them taken from the exclusive knowledge of members of his cabinet and some from the president’s own, intimate account.

No doubt, the presidency of George W. Bush has been a watershed for U.S. domestic and international politics. Whether his attempts to transform American politics will have a positive or negative outcome will depend upon the consequences of particular decisions. However, sometimes the inputs and results of those decisions are not sufficiently clear for political scientists to interpret and provide explanations. Journalism can be a peculiar source for gaining a truly analytical political understanding, especially when the context of an investigation addresses the secrecy regarding national intelligence that security considerations de-

mand. Bob Woodward and his trilogy of books on the Bush administration are quite elucidating for that reason. The war on terror and the Iraq invasion are the most salient events of the Bush administration and the ones that defined the priorities of the government and, for that matter, the international community.

If the intention is to clearly identify the relationship between the “war on terror” and the Iraq invasion or to recognize the political considerations that have been factored into the security equation, *Dead Certain* may not be the most obvious choice. But the interpretation of anecdotes about Bush may provide a relatively accurate approach to understanding the characteristics of this presidential conundrum and the relationship of some of his character traits to his policy decisions: his consistent punctuality; his disciplined regimen of physical exercise; his lack of hesitancy in making decisions; his displays of overconfidence; his projection of optimism and proudly emotional expression of his beliefs; an awkward awareness of his mistakes –though he also demonstrates equal reluctance to engage in any introspection. His often premature or misdirected optimism has been readily observed within his various proclamations –from “Mission Accomplished” through “stay the course” –especially when made in response to anyone questioning his Iraq strategy, whom he frequently would accuse, directly or indirectly, of not supporting the troops and, instead, wanting to “surrender to the terrorists” (Woodward, 2006: 490).

From the Republican primaries in 2000 to the State of the Union address in 2007, Draper unfolds Bush’s vision of his presidency and, moreover, his overall notion of the United States. Just as Condoleezza Rice assured the press, when she succeeded Colin Powell as secretary of state, that “I’m internalizing his world,” Draper also tries to internalize that world in which decision making is a cherished and almost addictive power. But planning and analysis have often been disdainfully dismissed by Bush and were deemed required only in order to justify, instead of support, the decision-making process. Statements by Bush such as “I know we’ll succeed. And I know it’s necessary to succeed,” appear to represent a very dogmatic but, somehow, self-pitying affirmation that the adventure in Iraq needs to mean something positive for the soldiers fighting there: “You can’t give a kid a gun and have him doubt whether or not the president thinks it’s right, and have him doubt whether or not he’s gonna be supported in all ways” (Draper, 2007: XV). Is that sort of declaration an unconscious recognition of his defeat in Iraq? To what extent have the dogmatic stances of

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George W. Bush and the persistent public denial of their tactical failures provided a sign of arrogance or an anchor of determination?

It is curious, if not ironic, that, during the primary elections, Karl Rove criticized the period of "peace and prosperity" that had been touted by admirers of the Clinton administration by proclaiming, "We're the candidate of reasonable, cautious, prudent reform" (Draper, 2007: 8). Ironic or not, White House decisions under Bush appear to have fallen far short of following that implied standard of rational choice. Instead, it has seemed as though no rational choice objection could pose an obstacle between the president's overall vision and the actual steps needed to attain victory. A prime example of that pattern of decision making is his rejection of the three main recommendations expressed by the Iraq Study Group: 1) transitioning U.S. forces from a combat to a support role; 2) making economic aid conditional upon evidence that the Iraqi government is keeping its promises toward achieving governmental reform and national reconciliation; 3) broadening diplomatic efforts to include Iran and Syria in negotiating the conditions necessary to achieve a stable Iraq. Instead, the Bush administration opted for the military reinforcement option of "the Surge."

Not even the Bush administration's sinking domestic approval rating could compel him to moderate the direction of his endeavors. The neo-conservative New American Century Project's assumptions and its seeming attachment to past glories of U.S. foreign policy provided underlying arguments for the Bush administration's approach to the Middle East. Meanwhile, the advice provided by the loyal White House Iraq Group reinforced feelings of certainty regarding these executive decisions. Loyalty and certainty replaced realism as the driving force for these international relations decisions. Indeed, apparently many critics have asserted that no rational choice path can be traced to the decisions made by the Bush administration in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives.

Loyalty, indeed, compromised the White House on a wide range of issues. It compromised cabinet appointments and the credibility of administration officials at all levels. Loyalty, above all else, was expected from all of these officials and it imposed an imperative, among them, of binding themselves to a course of action (intellectually, personally and emotionally) regardless of whether or not it was conducive to supporting the ultimate success of the presidential decision-making process. Colin Powell's address to the United Nations (incorrectly asserting that there was no doubt that Saddam was working to obtain key components to produce

nuclear weapons) is an excellent example of this problem. That address was required to coincide with the underlying beliefs of the president, rather than reflect an accurate assessment of the actual situation and the most effective approach toward resolving it.

Actually, Collin Powell was the “reluctant warrior” in this effort. He had not even been a member of the White House Iraq Group. He sometimes appeared to be the antithesis of the reckless president. Powell represented the moderate face of the Bush administration with a minimum of leverage but, initially, possessing strong public prestige. Yet he was captivated by this process and by its ongoing qualities rather than by its transformative possibilities. A clash of personalities took place between the “cautious” and the “resolute,” accompanied by a doctrinal confrontation. On the one hand, the “Powell doctrine” was based upon the desire, first, to limit the use of military engagements as a means of achieving political objectives, but, second, when the military *is* used, it should employ overwhelming force in order to guarantee success (Woodward, 2004: 78). On the other hand, the Bush strategy (which could barely be described as a “doctrine”) reflected an apparent willingness to use military force (unilaterally, when necessary) to avoid, preempt, or dissuade threats to the U.S. *status quo*. That approach was quite distinct from the “just war” apparently preferred by Powell, whose primary focus, in this respect, included an analysis of the threat, the means needed to address it, the level of support that it might generate, and the consequences of any response to it.

As a result of the ultimate rejection of the Powell doctrine in favor of the Bush strategy, overconfidence, based upon a biased interpretation of the actual tactical and strategic situation, merely strengthened the hegemonic crisis of the United States. Prior to the territorial violation of the “American sanctuary” (a perspective based upon its traditional detachment from the rest of the world but also based on an overstated commitment to the protection of human rights and liberties as part of an attachment to “American exceptionalism”), the hegemonic power was still in a good position to pursue the broader goals of its national and international agendas. Currently, that capacity has been eroded by the political undertakings of the administration as the exercise of U.S. power has been transformed from an asset into a burden upon its foreign policy—a problem that needs to be addressed by the next presidential administration.

Notwithstanding the outstanding contribution of Robert Draper, a personality diagnosis may not be sufficient for achieving a meaningful

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presidential evaluation. Michael Isikoff and David Corn do not stress the character of the decision makers but explore the intricate institutional maneuvers of personal and cabinet-level ventures that have been driven by hubris, resulting in acts of overbearing pride and self-confidence, often resulting in disaster. But a subtle distinction needs to be made in this case; President Bush was not the only promoter of the Iraq War. He did have the first and final word regarding this decision but White House and CIA loyalists were empowered to exert some influence over it, especially in the operational arena

Richard Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, Karl Rove, George Tenet, Lewis Libby, Paul Wolfowitz, and Andrew Card, among others, were behind the marketing apparatus of the Iraq War. It is commonly claimed by some critics that Bush was not in really “in charge” of his presidency. However, a nuanced evaluation of that claim is required. In one interview, Bob Woodward asked Donald Rumsfeld about the notion of Dick Cheney being the all-powerful vice-president who controls the president; the answer left a margin for interpretation when Rumsfeld replied that “he [Cheney] does not take strong positions when the president’s in the room that could conceivably position him contrary to the president... He asks good questions. But he doesn’t put the president in a corner or take away his options” (Woodward, 2006: 485). The president is still the president but the strong influence of some of his closest aides should not be dismissed as a source of advice and even mentoring.

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The Iraq War was not the result of a presidential decree or the acquiescence of a majority of members of the National Security Council. The image of strong leadership that Bush projected after a major national trauma was certainly a factor in his ascendancy. However, ties of loyalty and shared pre-war calculations made it possible for the administration to sustain and manage public support for the “crusade” against Saddam Hussein under the pretext of *possible* connections between the dictator and terrorists that could imply the threat of “weapons of mass destruction.” As a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration was granted an even greater deference by a frightened American people.

Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal and the Selling of the Iraq War sheds light on another facet of the current administration: the compromised intelligence network and public credulity that advanced the goal of war with Iraq. This book purports to disclose “how flawed intelligence was misused by the president and his top aides to take the nation

to war." It provides numerous revelations about the White House commitment to going to war, the CIA handling of intelligence as a means of providing a justification for the invasion, and the way that some journalists served as a fundamental element of the Iraq invasion "marketing machinery" in promoting a fraudulent case for war.

"There was a case to be made" (Isikoff and Corn, 2006: 17) was the central motivation for portraying Saddam Hussein as a threat to the international system in general and the United States in particular. Despite the claims that it was a "slam-dunk," the case for war was based on unproven, dubious assumptions and imprecise intelligence. The purpose of making this case was to create overwhelming support for the Iraqi adventure from the American public and, as a result, from Congress, including Democrats. In one sense, the Bush administration could claim that this marketing campaign was not even legally necessary, because a secret Justice Department memo, written after the 9/11 attacks, concluded that "there were 'no limits' to the presidential power when it came to waging the war on terrorism". But if the White House truly believed it already possessed the authority to invade Iraq, it raises the question of why Cheney and Libby were so eager to receive supporting intelligence from the CIA.

The extensive covert operation plans drawn up by the CIA to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime did not reveal tangible evidence to support the Bush administration's position on Iraq. Nonetheless, the White House Iraq Group was able to prompt widespread concerns regarding fundamental questions of national security. The effectiveness of raising these concerns was demonstrated by the Senate minority leader, Tom Daschle, when he wondered, "What if they're right about this?" This expression of doubt coincided with the sense of dogmatic certainty of the Bush administration as portrayed by Robert Draper, who quoted a core belief, typically expressed by many members of the administration: "We know what we are doing."

But *did* the administration know what it was doing? In this respect, Isikoff and Corn put forward an appropriate question when they asked, "Has Bush compounded this failure by overselling the limited and flawed intelligence because war was his preferred option?" (2006:18). If that interpretation of events is correct, an appropriate follow-up question would be: How did war get to be the preferred option in this situation, especially given a lack of international support and in the absence of a rational argument for the invasion? Cheney's preferred option appeared to favor war, too.

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The notion that somehow we've got to get across to people is they just cannot think of this as a conventional war. This is not Desert Storm. It's not Korea. It's not World War II. This is a struggle that's going to go on in that part of the world for decades....We just have to have people understand that and understand that the alternative is not peace (Hayes, 2007: 524).

The use of faulty intelligence and the hyping of meaningless evidence that often was only remotely related to potential weapons of mass destruction (such as the faulty findings about yellowcake in relation to the alleged sale of Nigerian uranium to Iraq) was indicative of the intelligence intrigues and distortion of information, unveiled further by the leak of the identity of Valerie Plame as a CIA operative and its subsequent political controversy and criminal investigation. "Scooter" Libby suffered the immediate consequences of this particular incident of the Bush administration misleading the U.S. public, but it also prompted a withdrawal of the administration from its original rationale for the invasion of Iraq. Paul Wolfowitz was subsequently asked, "How do you account for the intelligence failures regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?" He replied, "Well, I don't have to....We relied on the intelligence community" (Isikoff and Corn, 2006: 414). But, as these authors contend, that same intelligence community had been pressured by this same administration to produce these astonishing findings in order to support a political and irrational war.

Resignations ultimately followed the persistent failures of the Iraq adventure, including Donald Rumsfeld (who had openly disparaged the CIA's human intelligence capability) and George Tenet. Even so, there has been little or no ultimate accountability for those decisions regarding Iraq that were shown to be wrong. Ultimately, for most of the Bush administration officials who engaged in this process of faulty and, arguably, even fraudulent intelligence, "there were no consequences" (Isikoff and Corn, 2006: 413). There is a wide array of themes to explore as part of the effort to understand the motivations and the intelligence and political networks of the Bush administration. But in recalling the preference of Condoleezza Rice for "waiting until the underlying conditions were right, and then acting," that statement raises an unresolved question: Why did the Bush administration fail to wait for those right conditions to act, especially if the president's closest advisors were guided by such a principle? Apparently, the calculations of realism do not offer a ready explanation for Bush's

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claim to have walked a “fine line between realism and pessimism” and the administration’s subsequent refusal to admit failure.

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