

The George W. Bush Presidency and the Republican Party

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Background

Perhaps the only way I can adequately explain my viewpoint of George W. Bush and his Presidency and Party is to trace the development of that viewpoint.

I was raised in a strongly Republican family. My father was at one point a Precinct Committeeman for the party, my mother an activist against ERA and abortion. I was aware of political events and debates as I grew up and voted as soon as I was eligible. My opinions mostly matched those of my parents.

I remember my father's disgust at the first Clinton victory. I voted for Bob Dole but was not very excited about it. I was on my LDS Church mission when Clinton was impeached, and so did not follow it closely, but I had the usual Conservative visceral dislike for the man.

2000 Election and the beginning of the Presidency

When the year 2000 came, I was at college and in a position to pay closer attention to politics and world events than I had previously been. I was pleased to see the end of the Clinton Presidency.

I initially liked McCain, but I did not like the way that he seemed to give up early in the primaries. I voted for Bush by absentee ballot in the primary and again in the general election, using Illinois as my home state.

On the night of the election, I stayed up until about 2:30 in the morning waiting for the results. I saw at least one of the premature announcements of the results, saying that Bush had won. The student paper the next day declared, "Nobody Wins!" With this astoundingly close and historical election, I began paying closer attention to politics—it was interesting! That the president of nearly 300 million people could be decided by a margin of 537 votes is still amazing to me.

I agreed with the Supreme Court that it was unfair to conduct a hand recount in particular parts of Florida but not others. I also did not think it was fair to loosen the rules of which ballots were eligible after the election took place. Additionally, I figured that if a person was not intelligent enough to use the ballot correctly, that was an indication that perhaps they should not be voting. Since then, I have come to the conclusion that the ballot instructions were in fact misleading (though I have not researched it in detail). I have generally withheld

judgment about the Supreme Court's decision that the recount could not go forward statewide.

I watched the swearing-in live on TV. As Bush took the oath, I swelled with pride and happiness that he had won and was now my President. As I stood there feeling smug about his defeat of Al Gore (I was standing for some reason), I was suddenly hit by a somber feeling of the weight and responsibility that he now had. In words, the feeling was, "You had better pray for this man to be able to handle what he's going to face." It was not only a solemn feeling, but a serious and perhaps grave feeling. It struck me as an odd thing, since I really just wanted to feel smug and victorious. I did not think much about the experience for a few years.

I generally approved of the job Bush was initially doing. Then, of course, September 11 happened. It was at this point that I began getting a daily newspaper and following events more carefully. In the face of a direct attack and the loss of thousands of lives, the country seemed to develop overnight an incredible degree of solidarity and passion. We all cheered as the bombs began falling on Afghanistan.

Red flags and a conversion

I saw nothing to complain about for quite a while. In the summer of 2002, I visited New York City and Mexico City and began using the metric system. I had been reading and paying attention to the world and learning many new things in school—and in the process, my personality was developing. That fall, I began noticing the way that the administration was talking about Iraq.

To me, it didn't make sense. Saddam Hussein was not invading any country or massacring his civilians like he had a decade earlier. He was contained, and not even in full control of his country. Nothing had changed—the same tyrant was in charge that had been in charge for decades—but suddenly Bush was claiming that Hussein was a danger that must be removed *right away*. (Remember that Bush was the one who finally ordered the weapons inspectors out of Iraq, so what else can we conclude but that he portrayed Hussein as an urgent threat?) I was faintly alarmed to realize that the President, having started one war, now wanted to start another. I say "wanted to" on purpose, because it was becoming clear that Bush was agitating the American people and a part of the world community to start a war.

It was this alarm that caused me to begin supporting Democratic candidates in the midterm elections of 2002. I felt that it was important to have some kind of check on the President, but the Republicans had a unified government. Over the next year I saw, to my mild surprise, that the Republicans were in fact standing by Bush; they were not about to disown him, as I more and more felt inclined to do. It was not until late 2003 that I finally accepted that the

Republican Party would no longer represent me and my views for the foreseeable future, and I made it official by reregistering as a Democrat.

Toeing the line

Any censure of the Republican Party will inevitably draw two critiques: 1) the failures and problems of a few people or policies from the Party do not represent the Party as a whole (and certainly not any individual Republicans reading this essay), and 2) the Democratic Party is just as bad.

I will address the second point first: while there are many policies and actions of the Democratic Party with which I strongly and readily disagree, that is not the topic at hand. At any rate, I obviously do not agree that the Democratic Party is (currently) just as bad, on the whole, or I would not be a member.

When control of Congress passed to the Republicans after the 1994 elections, and especially after 2000, the leadership of both Houses implemented a policy of party discipline, centralization of power, and marginalization of opponents far beyond the precedent of previous decades. The Bush White House did the same. Here are some examples of this policy in action:

- 1) Threats by the Senate leadership to change the governing rules of that body (the so-called “Nuclear Option”) in response to the Democrat’s refusal to allow votes on 10 of President Bush’s 210 judicial nominees.
- 2) The decision by the House leadership to interfere with investigations by the Ethics committee when its decisions became embarrassing.
- 3) The redistricting push in Texas intended to create additional Republican House seats.
- 4) The repeated attempts by President Bush to expand executive authority in matters such as detentions, domestic surveillance, public release of information.
- 5) The attempt to force courts to obey dictates from Congress in the Terri Schiavo case.

On May 26, 2005, The Washington Post published a news analysis article entitled “GOP Tilting Balance Of Power to the Right”. Here are some portions of that analysis to corroborate my allegations:

“Republicans have already changed how the business of government gets done, in ways both profound and lasting.

“The campaign to prevent the Senate filibuster of the president's judicial nominations was simply the latest and most public example of similar transformations in Congress and the executive branch stretching back a decade. The common theme is to consolidate influence in a small circle of Republicans and to marginalize dissenting voices that would try to impede a conservative agenda.

“House Republicans, for instance, discarded the seniority system and limited the independence and prerogatives of committee chairmen. The result is a chamber effectively run by a handful of GOP leaders. At the White House, Bush has tightened the reins on Cabinet members, centralizing the most important

decisions among a tight group of West Wing loyalists. With the strong encouragement of Vice President Cheney, he has also moved to expand the amount of executive branch information that can be legally shielded from Congress, the courts and the public.

"Now, the White House and Congress are setting their sights on how to make the judiciary more deferential to the conservative cause -- as illustrated by the filibuster debate and recent threats by House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) and others to more vigorously oversee the courts.

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Those who cross party leaders often pay a price.

...

Bush created a top-down system in the White House much like the one his colleagues have in Congress. He has constructed what many scholars said amounts to a virtual oligarchy with Cheney, Karl Rove, Andrew H. Card Jr., Joshua Bolton, himself and only a few others setting policy, while he looks to Congress and the agencies mostly to promote and institute his policies.

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"I would remind my friends that you may one day be in the minority and you won't want to be [run] roughshod over," said former minority leader Robert H. Michel (R-Ill.), who served in the House for 38 years, 14 as leader."¹

As the last quote indicates, people in both parties have expressed dismay at what was happening.

Now, why am I pointing out all of this now that the Democrats have regained the majority? First, when a party insists on being monolithic, I can point to "the party" and criticize it. Second, many of the same people are still in office, most notably President Bush. Third, it is too early to say that anything has fundamentally changed in the attitudes of the officials and especially the citizens who elected them.

The Republican leadership was bent on making their party monolithic and permanently in control, but I also saw many citizens marching in lockstep with them. People I met kept parroting what Fox News and the politicians said. They took it as gospel. When the leader of the party insisted "I don't do nuance"², many of the party faithful apparently didn't either.

For example: When George Soros gave millions of dollars in the effort to defeat George Bush in 2004, media personalities such as Bill O'Reilly began attacking him. Rush Limbaugh speculated that Soros would fund torture, and House Speaker Hastert tried to tie him to drug money. Right on cue, I heard people at church talking about what an immoral man George Soros was. This is a man who has given more than \$4 billion for causes such as the anti-apartheid movement, Solidarity, Transparency International, the Grameen Bank, humanitarian assistance, and African poverty reduction.

Those who have spent years toeing the party line need to take a long, hard look at the way they approached the issues and responded to what their leaders said. My perspective is as one who had a number of discussions with people who do not understand or consider the

arguments and reasoning of those who disagree with them. For example, in about September 2004 I had a conversation with a young man who confidently pointed to the “freedom” of the Iraqis as a great accomplishment. When I tried to point out that the final state of the country was not yet clear and that it might end up as a theocracy like Iran, he did not understand what I was talking about. He simply could not think about the costs or the risks of the invasion.

I'm writing this partly because these people are still inflicting their votes upon the world.

Principles versus actions

In case after case, Republican politicians have acted in an unprincipled manner, often violating the very values they claim to embody. Since I am a Virginian, I will start with an example from this state. While I can't speak for those in other states, the state officials in Virginia make it very easy to be a Democrat.

- 1) In the 2005 Virginia gubernatorial race, Democrat Tim Kaine had the advantage of being associated with the popular incumbent Mark Warner. Warner, who had been a businessman before running for office, greatly impressed me by the way he led. When he decided that the state needed a tax increase, he traveled around the state meeting with people to explain his views. He built a following through patient persuasion.

The state has been ranked as the best-governed in the country. His successor, Kaine, promised to continue this governance. The man is a Catholic and had worked with missionaries in Honduras, has a family and children, and appears to be about as moral, decent, pragmatic, and competent as anyone can hope for in a leader. Here is what The Roanoke Times said about his opponent, Republican candidate Jerry Kilgore:

“If his television ads are to be trusted, Jerry Kilgore believes that serving as a court-appointed attorney to a death row inmate disqualifies someone from serving as governor of Virginia. That demonstrates either astounding ignorance of the American judicial system and the vital role played by defense attorneys in capital cases, or it constitutes an offensive and vile attempt to manipulate an emotional issue for base political gain. Either way, Kilgore drags the governor's race to an insulting new low with his attack on Tim Kaine's principled stance on the death penalty. Kaine has repeatedly said that, while religious convictions lead him personally to oppose the death penalty, as governor he would follow the law and would exercise his clemency powers sparingly.”³

Kilgore had tried demagoguery, the tactic used by Amalickiah. I have seen quite a few politicians and media and religious figures try to stir people up against other groups.

- 2) During the 2004 Presidential campaign, John Kerry struggled to effectively explain why he thought that the opposition to the Iraq War from other countries was significant. Many in the far-right media attacked him bitterly for what they said was a surrender of sovereignty to other countries. Kerry was mocked for the idea that we

would need “permission” from foreigners to do whatever we wanted to do.

What I think Kerry was trying to express was that, while we retain sovereignty and control over our own military, it is simply not *prudent* to disregard one’s neighbors. If everyone I know tells me that I have a problem with speeding, it does not take away my freedom of choice to acknowledge that, based on the overwhelming consensus, I ought to slow down. On election night, 2004, Fox News called the other countries “the coalition of the irrelevant.” The idea that a responsible foreign policy would in any way take into account the viewpoints and wishes of foreign countries was mocked. Several years later, it seems apparent that our speeding has indeed caused an accident, and both Fox News and the country seem foolish.

- 3) The Republican Party has long talked about protecting or promoting marriage. While that is certainly a worthy goal, and I do think that judges are wrong to impose same-sex rights in defiance of the legislative process, George Bush and the 109th Congress lost their credibility because of their actions regarding the Terri Schiavo case.

The important facts in the case were that, since she was incapacitated, her husband, Michael, had the right to make medical decisions for her. He said that she would have wanted to be allowed to die rather than linger for decades with no hope of regaining consciousness. The most credible medical opinion was that she had no hope of ever doing so.

Because Terri’s parents did not want her to be allowed to die, they fought Michael’s decision in court and lost resoundingly and repeatedly. He, as husband, had the right to direct that her feeding tube be removed. However, Governor Jeb Bush, President Bush, and the Republican leadership of Congress all jumped on the bandwagon of the Conservatives who made a cause célèbre out of the parents of Terri. Florida passed a State law which attempted to overrule the courts; it was struck down. Congress hurriedly passed a law specifically for “relief of the parents of Theresa Marie Schiavo”. When that also came to naught, members of Congress threatened the courts at a time when judges and their families had recently been murdered. They also tried to subpoena Terri. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a doctor but not a neurologist, diagnosed her based on having seen her on video.

These actions were wrong on many levels. Interference with the courts and the passage of these laws demonstrate a lack of respect for the Constitution that they had sworn to uphold. The disregard for the marriage rights of Michael Schiavo is inexcusable. One might be tempted to believe Republican protestations that they were merely acting on conscience, on their sincere concern for Terri—but that would be undercut by the fact that House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, calling the removal of

the feeding tube “an act of barbarism,” had consented to the removal of life support for his father 17 years earlier.

President Bush said at the time that it was best to “err on the side of life.” I disagreed, pointing out that it is better not to err at all.

- 4) Speaking of President Bush’s high regard for life, how exactly does support for capital punishment constitute “err[ing] on the side of life”? Also, the Republican leadership attempted to push the boundaries of what is acceptable in prisoner treatment, which does not seem to indicate a high respect for life. The CIA covertly flew prisoners to third countries, where they were tortured. Alberto Gonzales indicated that international agreements such as the Geneva Conventions are quaint and outdated. The administration has attempted to hold people as prisoners indefinitely with no evidence that they are guilty of anything. No, I’m still not seeing any respect for life here.

Come to think of it, President Bush started a war. Wars generally involve death. So, someone who wants to err on the side of life would probably be very concerned about the casualties of a war that they began, right? Well, originally the military refused to discuss Iraqi casualties because they “don’t do body counts.” Then, when a group of scientists conducted a mortality survey of Iraq and published it in a peer-reviewed journal, the President dismissed the result as “not credible,” preferring instead to pull a number out of...um, the air. How many people have died above and beyond the rate we would expect under Saddam Hussein? Not 650,000 (so far), according to George Bush, but one twentieth of that. (Having listened to the researcher who published the higher figure describe why it is credible, I don’t see any way that the President is in the right ballpark.) To me, President Bush actually seems to treat the sanctity and dignity of life with frivolity.

- 5) Suppose that we set all of those incongruities aside by considering them to be merely the means to achieving the grand vision of this administration: remaking the Middle East as a free, modern, and pluralistic society. According to Bush’s rhetoric of the past few years, this has been his aim. It was part of his justification for the Iraq War, even before we learned that there had been no Iraqi weapons programs (though of course it became a more important justification of the war at that point).

George Bush invaded a country partly to unseat a dictator. He has preached democracy and freedom. Yet he has been friendly and supportive to dictators such as Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo and the late Saparmurat Niyazov, rulers of countries that happen to have hydrocarbon resources. The foreign policy of President Bush has been driven by idealism and a sense of divine mission when it comes to

Iraq—“There’s a higher Father that I appeal to” —and a lack of principle when it comes to other dictatorships. Perhaps his focus on Saddam Hussein is the result of Hussein’s attempted assassination of Bush’s father in 1993.

While pursuing these policies, he seems to be quite naïve about the cultures he is affecting so profoundly.

- 6) For those who have insisted that Bush does not lie: the week before the November, 2006, election, Bush told reporters that Donald Rumsfeld would remain as the Secretary of Defense until the end of his presidency. The day after the election, he announced Rumsfeld’s resignation and the selection of Robert Gates as his replacement, a choice that had already been made the week before. Bush admitted to misleading reporters (lying) and even explained why he did it. In part, he did it because he did not want the electorate to learn about it just before an election. In other words, he lied to the public for political reasons.

President Bush told a similar lie when John Snow was nearing the end of his tenure.

- 7) The President has often tried to project an air of authority and military toughness. He landed on an aircraft carrier in a fighter plane while wearing a flight suit. Republicans have mocked Democrats for supposedly being weak on national security. John Kerry would likely have won the election if not for the attacks on his military service by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

It is ironic then that George Bush is the one who did not see combat during Vietnam, while Kerry did. It seems that Bush was able to avoid combat because of the political connections of his father.

Furthermore, this “soldierly” president has not protected his soldiers. When the Defense Secretary was asked why more army vehicles were not adequately armored, he said, “You have to go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you want.” Because we chose the Iraq war and its timing, we could have taken the time to build the army we want. We could have gotten armored vehicles before the invasion. As late as August 2003, only 15 armored Humvees were produced per month, a figure which eventually rose to at least 450. Intelligence agencies had warned of the possibility of an insurgency, among other risks, but the administration and the military only planned for the best-case invasion scenario (which was that we would be greeted as liberators).

Ultimately, though his motives are immeasurably nobler than the terrorists’, the actual result of having George Bush as President has been a second 9/11 when one considers

the soldiers we have lost. However, George Bush has harmed the country far beyond what the number of dead would suggest. The Iraq War has left our military unable to be an effective deterrent in other places. Our standing, clout, credibility, and moral authority in the international community have been dramatically weakened, and we have inflamed passions in a volatile part of the world.

- 8) The Republicans in the White House and in Congress have dramatically increased government spending. If a person makes \$2 million over a lifetime, then the Republicans have wasted hundreds of thousands of lifetimes of work through their spending.

Republicans have long promoted their party as being a home for those concerned about morality and values. In my view, the party has no such advantage. Each of the problems listed above has a moral component to it.

Picture of a President and a Party

Over the past few years, what I saw of the President and his party and how they governed led me to see them in a certain way.

President Bush is a reactionary politician. He did not pay attention to terrorism until 9/11; he did not pay attention to space exploration until the Columbia disaster. And when he tackled the problems, he has simply promoted bad policy: his way to address national security was to go into Iraq, and his vision for the space program did not promote actual science. His bad policy has included farm subsidies, steel tariffs, a hostility toward science and market-based solutions when it comes to climate change, and support for Creationism in science classes. His good policies, such as his support for Dubai Ports World and for cellulosic fuels, do not in my view make up for the problems.

Though he is reactionary, he is also astonishingly stubborn and illogical. He has long maintained that Hussein was a threat, even after it became clear that he was not. Right before the 2006 midterm elections, he refused to acknowledge the possibility of a Democratic victory. In fact, when asked about how he would work with a Democratic Congress, he ignored the question and talked at length about why he did not think it would happen.

George Bush surrounded himself with a small group of advisors who shared his grand and disastrous vision of remaking the world by military force. His administration has been insular and secretive. He has proudly said that he does not read the newspapers. He believes things without questioning his assumptions or hearing or understanding dissenting views. He continually argues against the straw man.

He is sure to be remembered as one of the worst presidents in U.S. history.

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- ¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/25/AR2005052501997.html>
 - ² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A46667-2004Feb16?language=printer>
 - ³ <http://www.roanoke.com/editorials/wb/36011>