

Introduction:
Special Edition on the Legacy of George W. Bush

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In 2000, George W. Bush campaigned for the presidency by promising to be a uniter, not a divider. But his presidency soon became one of the most divisive, partisan, and controversial in recent memory, if not in all of presidential history. And despite being elected to a second term in 2004, Bush's presidency ended in apparent failure and disrepute. Bush left office with the nation mired in two controversial wars, with a record budget deficit, a financial crisis and an economy in recession, and the Republican Party in disarray. Scholars are currently debating whether Bush will be remembered merely as one of the worst presidents in history (along with Buchanan and Hoover), or perhaps as the single worst president of the 42 individuals who have ever held the office (Wilentz 2006; Foner 2006). This volume is devoted to the question of Bush's legacy. In the following eleven articles, a diverse group of scholars seeks to make sense of Bush's impact on public policy, politics, and the presidency.

Bush's presidency was largely defined by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Bush apparently believed that the attacks left him with a profound responsibility to bring their perpetrators to justice and to prevent any future attacks, regardless of whether the means toward those ends were controversial or clearly justified. Bush's response to the attacks via the "war on terror" was a decidedly mixed affair. To his partisans, Bush helped to safeguard the U.S. from another major terrorist attack on American soil, and his military action freed some 60 million people from highly oppressive regimes. But to his many critics, Bush's invasion of Afghanistan failed to net Osama bin Laden, and the invasion of Iraq on dubious if not duplicitous grounds exacted a terrible price. Moreover, the war on terror led to scandalous abuses of human rights abroad and to constitutional abuses at home. In a colossal failure of leadership and squandered opportunity, Bush turned the nearly global empathy for the U.S. in the days after 9/11 into nearly global disdain just a couple years later, as the Iraq war dragged on and photos emerged of the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

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Overall, Bush's presidency is perhaps best viewed in terms of the calamitous bookends of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, with very low popularity and efficacy before and after those horrible events bracketing a four-year period of relative wartime strength. The uneven nature of Bush's presidency is reflected in his poll numbers: Bush broke the record for the highest level of presidential approval ever recorded in a Gallup Poll (90%, shortly after 9/11) but also set the record for Gallup's highest ever rate of disapproval (69%, in April 2008). And his last couple years in office routinely brought low approval ratings of the sort not seen since Watergate or the Truman Administration.

One of the key features of Bush's presidency was the way he vigorously asserted the powers and prerogatives of the presidency and sought to enhance the strength of the executive (Pfiffner 2008). Several of the articles here address this theme. Christopher Kelley examines the doctrine of the unitary executive, which Bush often invoked to justify his actions. Kelley also discusses Bush's extraordinary use of presidential signing statements and argues that it may have undercut the legitimate claims of the unitary executive. Similarly, Mark Rozell and Mitchell Sollenberger analyze Bush's bold claims of executive privilege and find that they may have undermined the legitimacy of this necessary feature of an effective chief executive. Graham Dodds traces Bush's use of unilateral presidential directives, which ranged from mundane to radical. Jody Baumgartner discusses how the office of the Vice President grew to an unprecedented level of importance in the executive branch under Dick Cheney.

Bush's bold claims of executive power led to numerous repudiations by the judiciary, even though Bush placed two justices on the Supreme Court (one as Chief Justice). Kevin McMahon analyzes Bush's unsuccessful nomination of Harriet Miers as a way of understanding his broader approach to filling Supreme Court vacancies. And Justin Wert seeks to place Bush's unconstitutional restrictions of habeas corpus into a broader context, by demonstrating how they fit into a long trajectory of conservative legal thought.

In the area of domestic policy, Bush left a mixed record, despite having four years of united Republican control of government for the first time in a half century. By many accounts, while Bush campaigned as a compassionate conservative, he did not govern as one; aside from a couple notable bipartisan actions (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the 2006 Medicare prescription drug coverage program), he and his administration consistently steered public policy in a sharply conservative direction, from multiple rounds of tax cuts for the affluent to regulatory rollbacks. Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha and Tom Miles examine Bush's domestic policy agenda and find that despite the president's effort to move fast and early on a few select

items, lack of public support doomed many of his major initiatives. Byron Daynes and Glen Sussman evaluate Bush's environmental policies and finds that Bush's green rhetoric was not matched by a green record.

Like other presidents, Bush's political efficacy was in part tied to how he was portrayed in the press and media. Stephen Farnsworth and Robert Lichter examines how Bush aggressively sought to manage the media, but how his coverage became more negative as the events of 9/11 receded. Some of the most damning criticisms of Bush have come not from his political opponents but from people who served in his administration (e.g., Paul O'Neill, Scott McClellan, and John DiIulio). Yet Leonard Moore contends that Bush's failures are in no small part attributable to conservatism itself, rather than to the president. Similarly, Joseph Mink traces Bush's relationship with the Republican Party and his efforts to secure a lasting Republican majority. His analysis suggests that scholars may need to rethink the concept of political realignment and the nature of the president's relation to his party.

In short, the articles here cover many of the major themes and issues and set out some of the primary aspects of George W. Bush's remarkable presidency. They vary in their assessment, with some finding great failure where others see successes, and some seeing Bush fitting into broader historical patterns while others point to unprecedented or even radical actions. But it is perhaps suiting that a controversial presidency elicits scholarly disagreement. It may well take decades for Bush's true legacy to become clear, but the articles here suggest that Bush profoundly transformed the institution of the presidency and various aspects of U.S. politics.

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