

## *Evaluating the Bush Presidency: The Travails of a Tory*

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The president is in a constant state of dependency on his environment for creating favorable strategic positions from which he can exercise leadership at the margins to turn opportunities into accomplishments. Given his weak strategic position in regards to his leadership resources, his leeway in public policy, and his political coalition, President Bush had fewer opportunities to exploit than most presidents. Under these circumstances, he turned to foreign policy, where his inclinations and expertise lay and where he had greater flexibility and more opportunities to leave his mark on history.

In general, the Bush presidency was a term devoted to consolidating the changes of the Reagan administration and dealing with the problems it left behind rather than mobilizing a coalition behind bold new enterprises. It was a term of prudent stewardship, practicing a politics of moderation, but not one that was oriented toward laying the groundwork for significant changes in domestic policy or explaining itself to the American people.

Evaluating presidents is the Moby Dick of American politics. It is the great white whale, the ubiquitous topic of discussion in both the press and the academy. Yet the prevalence of assessing presidents has not led to conceptual clarification of the standards of evaluation. What should be taken into consideration when evaluating individual presidents?

One could, of course, simply compare the policy dispositions of the president with one's own preferences. One may believe that elementary and secondary education is adequate, or that it can be improved by basically allocating more money to it, or that a more radical approach such as President Bush's voucher proposal would be helpful. One may believe that a major stimulus package would have revived the economy and thus that the president should have proposed one, or one may conclude that the slow-growing economy is a reflection of a global slump in which the U.S. has been doing better than most G-7 nations, that most of the forces behind the slump are beyond the control of government in the short-term, and that interventions in the economy will do more harm than good.

If there is a close match between the president's policies and our preferences, we may decide that the president has done a rather good job. On the other hand, a substantial difference may lead us to conclude that the

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president is a failure. Inevitably, many of our evaluations involve just such a comparison, but if we go no further, we run the risk of confusing normative and empirical judgments.

In this paper I evaluate the Bush presidency with a focus on what I term the “persuasive presidency,” leadership of the public and Congress. A good place to begin is with some of the premises that frequently underlay evaluations of the presidency:

1. The president is at the center of the political universe and has the potential to influence anyone (or any country) to support him.
2. A bias toward activism, in which bold programs and “action” are assumed to be good.

Together these premises lead to assumptions such as the notion that the president can and should “control” the economy.

Ultimately, scholars should include presidents’ job definitions, their goals in office, and the environmental constraints on their influence as standards against which to evaluate their achievements. Presidents differ as to the ends and means of office, and our evaluations ought not to reflect a bias toward activism. Moreover, the centrality of the president ought to be subject to empirical testing and not an article of faith (see Rose 1993).

### **Bush’s Strategic Position**

To properly evaluate a presidency, we have to examine the context in which it occurred. Richard Neustadt’s comments about the critical reaction in Washington to Jimmy Carter are equally appropriate to the Bush administration.

Too much is expected of a President in Carter’s shoes. . . . Washingtonians, like less attentive publics, tend to project on the Presidency expectations far exceeding anyone’s assured capacity to carry through. Objectively, 1977 had little in common with 1965; still, as Carter started out the LBJ analogy filled many minds. . . . Whatever were they thinking of? Ignorance is bliss (Neustadt 1980, 210-212).

When George Bush took the oath of office on January 20, 1989, he already was fighting an uphill battle. He began his tenure with one of the worst strategic positions of any newly-elected president in our history. There are three dimensions of this that bear examination: his leadership resources, his leeway in taking policy initiatives, and the nature of his coalition.

## **Leadership Resources**

New presidents traditionally claim a mandate from the people, because the most effective means of setting the terms of debate and overcoming opposition is the perception of an electoral mandate, an impression that the voters want to see the winner's programs implemented. Indeed, major changes in policy, as in 1933, 1965, and 1981, virtually never occur in the absence of such perceptions.

Mandates can be powerful symbols in American politics. They accord added legitimacy and credibility to the newly elected president's proposals. Concerns for representation and political survival encourage members of Congress to support the president if they feel the people have spoken.

Mandates change the premises of decision. Perceptions of a mandate in 1980 placed a stigma on big government and exalted the unregulated marketplace and large defense budgets. Ronald Reagan had won a major victory even before the first vote on his legislative proposals.

George Bush was not so lucky. The conditions of his electoral victory undermined any claims that the White House could make as to having received a mandate. The new president's popular vote percentage was a respectable but unimpressive 53 percent, and his party lost seats in both houses of Congress. He actually ran behind the winners in 379 of the 435 congressional districts. Thus, there was little basis for members of Congress inferring presidential coattails.

Other factors that might encourage the perception of a mandate also were missing in 1988 (for more on the conditions that encourage perceptions of a mandate, see Edwards 1989, ch. 8). The press did not engage in the hyperbolic analyses that characterized coverage of the 1980 elections results, and since Bush had led in the polls throughout the entire post-convention period, his victory lacked the psychological advantage of surprise. Furthermore, Bush emphasized continuity, not change, in his campaign and did not offer bold new initiatives.

Thus, the new president's strategic position was not one in which he was able to structure the choices of Congress as being for or against a chief executive who had the support of the people.

A second important leadership resource for a president is the strength of his party in Congress. President Bush took office facing the largest opposition majority in Congress of any newly-elected president in American history—Democratic advantages of ten seats in the Senate and 85 seats in the House.

**Leeway in Public Policy**

Lack of leadership resources was not George Bush's only problem. He also was constricted tightly in his freedom to take policy initiatives. The primary source of the constraints on the new president was the problem of the budget deficit.

The basic outline of the budget tells the story. There was very little in the way of slack resources with which to take policy initiatives. The overriding concern had to be meeting the requirements of Gramm-Rudman-Hollings. Yet reducing expenditures is also extremely difficult. Most of the budget falls under the heading of "uncontrollables." Policies in this category range from Social Security to payments on the national debt. Ronald Reagan already had cut all that was politically feasible to trim from "discretionary" domestic policy programs. Bush could not make a mark by wringing even more from them.

That leaves defense spending. There was no popular support for increasing the defense budget (Reagan already had done that, too), especially in the Gorbachev era. At the same time, there had been no real growth in defense spending in the second Reagan term, making the Pentagon's budget difficult to reduce. Bush could do little but leave it the same until the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe.

In addition, the government agenda was filled largely with problems left over from the previous administration, ranging from the budget deficit and bailing out savings and loan institutions, to cleaning up nuclear power plants and wringing corruption from federal housing programs. As a result, the president was reduced largely to pronouncing platitudes about a "kinder, gentler nation" and wanting to be the "education president."

**Nature of Bush's Coalition**

Thus, Bush was in a weak position to move forward or backward. The historical context of his presidency forced him into the role of consolidating the policy shifts of his predecessor and managing government well after the era of Ronald Reagan's anti-government and anti-communism activism of the 1980s.

Bush political strategist Robert Teeter set the administration in historical context when he described the 1988 election as one that was to build on the changes Reagan had brought to government, not to change them. Bush himself emphasized continuity, as did his chief of staff, John Sununu (Duffy and Goodgame 1992, 19, 37).

The problem was that he also had to respond to changing circumstances and create his own political identity. The coalition that brought him into office, the Reagan coalition, was one formed in response to hard times, but not one that could withstand them. The Reagan Democrats wanted government to act on their behalf when the economy soured, and Bush was not geared to do it.

### **Projecting a Vision**

Bush's personal agenda was small. A *Doonesbury* cartoon published before his inaugural had Bush on his first day in office declaring: "So far today, I've said the Pledge and I haven't joined the ACLU and I haven't furloughed any murderers. I've delivered on my entire mandate, and it isn't even lunch yet." At the end of Bush's first year in office, conservative columnist George Will summarized it with "Bush Promised Little; We Got What He Promised" (Will 1990a). In November of 1990 John Sununu told a conservative audience, "There's not a single piece of legislation that needs to be passed in the next two years for this president. In fact, if Congress wants to come together, adjourn, and leave, it's all right with us" (quoted in Duffy and Goodgame 1992, 82).

But the point is not that Bush did little, but that he promised little, and that is not, on its face, illegitimate. We ought not to have a bias toward activism and against those who are averse to the "do anything as long as you are doing something" approach to government. When the public turns to Washington, however, Toryism usually is found wanting.

The conventional wisdom holds that one of Ronald Reagan's greatest strengths was his ability to project a vision of where he wanted the country to move. George Bush, on the other hand, repeatedly has been criticized either for lacking such a vision (essentially, coherent policy positions), or for ineffectively articulating it, or both. This stewardship of competence without a compass, it is said, detracted from his ability to build a strong image and to lead the American people and Congress.

Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter were criticized for exactly the same thing. Interestingly, this criticism also is reminiscent of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s description of FDR, who he said was committed to people, not ideology, had "no philosophy save experiment, which was a technique; constitutionalism, which was a procedure; and humanity, which was a faith." This sounds like a "procedural presidency" (see Mullins and Wildavsky 1992).

Nevertheless, charges of a government adrift and of a president without moorings are serious and deserve our attention. And it is true that Bush's understated style, lack of big, new proposals, and the absence of calls to

follow him on a crusade rarely inspired the public with a sense of purpose or conveyed a sense of a unifying theme and a cohesive program.

George Bush lacked rhetorical skill, and he knew it. He was uncomfortable in the “bully pulpit,” and believed, moreover, that public saberrattling was counterproductive. Thus, his preference was to move incrementally toward solutions to discrete problems, rather than engage in conceptual, strategic thinking and grand oratory. He went public as much as his predecessors, but he was more comfortable building consensus one-on-one, behind closed doors. Broad coalitions crafted through brokerage politics were his preferred method of problem resolution.

It is one thing to describe Bush’s limitations as a public communicator. It is something quite different to attribute significance to them—and there has been more uninformed discussion here than on any area of the Bush presidency. Rhetorical skill aside (and few presidents have it), we must ask if Bush’s approach was appropriate for *his* goals and the context in which *he* was operating. In general, I think, it was.

### **Why Did He Do What He Did?**

Bush’s fundamental problem was not his failure to project a vision. Rather, it was that, campaign rhetoric aside, he practiced the politics of moderation—and he suffered the consequences of doing so, much like Jimmy Carter.

The seeming lack of clarity in his policy stances may confuse those accustomed to the stark positions of the Reagan administration, but they are not difficult to understand if one thinks of George Bush as a moderate Republican, not a zealot—a Tory who experienced conflicting impulses and who was not interested in polarizing the country to bring about substantial change. As a result, he has been regarded by many as a failure, essentially because he was neither liberal nor Reaganite.

The Buchanan Brigades of the far right especially were distressed with the president’s moderation. He failed to condemn the Chinese government’s repression of the democracy movement with sufficient vigor to satisfy them, and he similarly failed to support the secessionist movements in the Soviet Baltic states in any tangible way. Bush’s support for environmental legislation, civil rights, higher taxes, Puerto Rican statehood, relaxation of high-tech exports to Eastern Europe, rights for the disabled, and a lack of restrictions on the National Endowment for the Arts and his civil orientation toward homosexual groups (the Republican National Convention notwithstanding) disappointed many on the Republican right (see for example Viguierie and Allen 1990, A15). The desertion of conservative House

Republicans on the vote on the president's hard-won budget compromise in October 1990 was one of the low points of the Bush administration.

Bush's conflicting impulses are reflected throughout the range of public policies. He supported a strong and comprehensive Clean Air Act and strengthened EPA enforcement of environmental protection regulations, but then he moderated in the face of trade-offs between the environment and jobs—much as Bill Clinton had done in Arkansas.

In the area of civil rights, Bush promoted the Americans with Disabilities Act, vigorous enforcement of the Voting Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act, and most of what became the 1991 Civil Rights Act. The administration tried to walk the thin line between endorsing discrimination and endorsing big government. Thus, its opposition to special preferences for African Americans was not a function of racial prejudice but of a general antagonism to statism and a preference for personal freedom. Sensitivity to minority rights clashed with individualist inclinations.

During the Bush years, spending on social programs such as Medicaid, Elementary Education, Food Stamps, Head Start, and Child Nutrition grew much more rapidly than under Reagan (and often even than under Carter). Although Bush did not always take the lead, he negotiated reasonable compromises in line with his thinking. It made sense to hammer out compromises, given the numbers in Congress. He could, of course, have made the grand gesture and ended up with a worse bill and an override of his veto. Moreover, he compromised even when it cost him politically, which frequently was the case insofar as the country would not credit him for a settlement because the choices were too complicated and difficult to be explained in a sound bite.

We find a similar moderation—and complexity—in foreign policy. The success of Operation Desert Storm was possible only because of the coalition assembled by George Bush—one unparalleled in world history—and one that would not have supported the direct overthrow of Saddam Hussein. At the close of his term, the U.S. deployed its armed forces, for the first time in history, for large-scale humanitarian purposes in a foreign nation (Somalia)—but only after alternatives were exhausted and the groundwork was laid for a consensual policy.

Communism would have fallen no matter who was in the White House, but Bush deftly encouraged the dismantling of the Eastern bloc without being overly-assertive and provoking a defensive backlash from the Soviet Union. The unification of Germany took discreet action and masterly skill and the ability to recognize and exploit an opportunity for achievement. The same is true of the unprecedented arms control agreements negotiated with Russia and the negotiations in the Middle East following the Gulf War.

Subtle actions, not grand gestures, also were called for in the U.S. show of force that helped stave off the attempted *coup* in the Philippines. It is easy to forget that Central America was a hot spot in U.S. foreign policy when Bush took office, but he cooled the rhetoric and quietly helped depolarize the conflict and bring about a peaceful transition to a more democratic regime in Nicaragua.

The moderation of his policy stances led many to conclude that Bush lacked strong policy preferences. Yet, the record shows that he stuck to his guns on a basic economic policy, including free trade (which expanded greatly under Bush), enterprise zones, capital gains cuts, and deregulation. The 1990 budget agreement was a bold policy, and Bush made it stick in the face of enormous pressure to break it. It forced Congress to find offsetting spending reductions or tax increases for every increase in spending and met his goal of limiting spending. He also quietly persevered and finished the costly job of bailing out the savings and loan institutions with minimal disruption to the economy.

Bush also was consistent on a wide range of other issues, including abortion, family leave, education reform, and relations with China—always in the face of strong criticism from the opposition. We must look elsewhere than to his policy orientation to find fault with the politics of his presidency.

### **What Was the Option?**

The criticism of Bush as a public leader assumes that there was another viable choice in political strategy—that the president could have moved the public and accomplished more. Just what this “more” was, typically is left unspecified. Some appear to argue that the president simply should have exploited his political capital, principally his high standing in the polls, to lead Congress rather than rebuke it for failing to pass his proposals.

### **Over Their Heads**

Apparently, the way he should have led Congress was to go over its head to the people. The fact that there is very little in the political science literature to support the proposition that this would work, the fact that presidents rarely succeed in doing this, the fact that Ronald Reagan attempted repeatedly to mobilize the public and succeeded only once—in a highly unusual circumstance and on a large tax cut—seems to make little impression on these critics (see Edwards 1989, ch. 7). One is tempted to repeat Neustadt’s question, “Whatever are they thinking of?”



Many conservatives argued that Bush should have appealed more to the public and forced polarizing choices, losing some points off his approval ratings but solidifying a committed core of the public to serve as the base for changes in policy (Will 1990b). Aside from the notable limitations on any president seeking to mobilize the public (Edwards 1989, ch. 7), Bush did not want to make major changes in policy.

Some charge that in the absence of polarizing actions, Bush's support was wide but shallow, unlike that of Ronald Reagan, who had followers committed to his ideas. We lack sufficient data to answer this question, but we do know that Reagan fell to 35 percent approval in January 1983, when times were bad (albeit much worse than in 1991-1992), and his approvers were, predictably, white Republicans. There is little hard evidence of a special commitment to Ronald Reagan (data on Reagan's public support can be found in Edwards 1990).

### **Setting the Agenda**

Still, the ultimate issue is what a president does with his public support, and what he tries to do with it. Here we find the fundamental weakness in the Bush presidency. *He did not know how to explain what he wanted or what he had done.* This criticism is more subtle and less dramatic than what most commentators have in mind. It focuses less on rallying the public behind specific legislation than on influencing public opinion in broader ways.

First, the president must take care of himself and project an image of having a concern and a direction. For example, through his public rhetoric, Ronald Reagan bought himself some protection from criticism on the budget deficit, religiosity, and family values, despite considerable variance between his stated views and his actual behavior.

Most important of all, presidential public leadership can be a major force in setting the policy agenda in America. By this I mean setting the terms of debate on important issues and structuring the choices of citizens and legislators alike.

In general, Bush made little connection between his public relations and his policy initiatives. He held more press conferences in a year than Ronald Reagan did in eight years, and met frequently with reporters in informal ways, as well. Yet he used these sessions to respond to journalists' inquiries rather than as part of an effort to advance his own policies.

George Bush genuinely wanted to be the Education President, and he proposed a genuinely innovative policy to improve education in America. Yet he had little impact on the public debate about education policy and was

not able to structure discussion around his proposal. This takes sustained effort and effective public relations techniques, and the Bush White House evidenced neither.

Framing issues in ways that favor the president's programs may set the terms of the public and congressional debate on his proposals and thus the premises on which members of Congress cast their votes. The Bush White House allowed the issue of cuts in taxes on capital gains to be structured as a decision regarding equity ("benefits for the rich") rather than in terms of efficiency ("creating jobs"). The former had little chance of passage through a Democratic Congress, while some version of the latter is likely to pass this year.

Similarly, the president needs to be more publicly engaged if Congress is to make progress on many difficult issues. Even though the president cannot move Congress to his point of view through a couple of prime-time addresses, he needs to lay the ground work for policy change. The issues on which Bush went all out and took political risks to win in Congress—the Tower and Thomas nominations, the veto override on visas for Chinese students, the war with Iraq, and the 1990 budget agreement—received extensive press coverage naturally, and in the cases of Tower, Thomas, and Iraq could be viewed in personal terms. Most issues require more initiative from the White House.

An important element of a president's legislative strategy is to set the agenda of Congress. If the president is not able to focus Congress's attention on his priority programs, they may become lost in the complex and overloaded legislative process. Of course, setting the agenda for Congress requires having one, and George Bush had only a modest agenda. Moreover, the president hit the ground coasting, not running. The White House was quick to announce that there would be no One Hundred Days in the Bush administration!

If a president does not attempt to set the terms of debate on important issues and structure the choices of others, he very well may fall into a reactive mode. Administrations with limited agendas have more potential for the presidency to be dictated by events.

On the other hand, this poses no particular problem for the Tory who wants to be a steward. And one could argue that smaller agendas leave more time for concentration on events, especially momentous events such as those we have witnessed in the 1990s. No matter who was president during Bush's tenure, much of his agenda would have been foisted upon him by Li Peng, Mikhail Gorbachev, Eastern European Democrats, Manuel Noriega, and Saddam Hussein.

### **The 1992 Election**

The president bore the harsh consequences of his weak strategic position and his restricted political strategy in the presidential election of 1992. Bush became only the fifth sitting president this century to meet defeat (the other defeated incumbents were Taft, Hoover, Ford, and Carter). His 38 percent of the vote was the lowest for an incumbent president in 80 years. Clearly, the public, as Clinton argued, wanted change. For a president who for most of his term was one of the most popular chief executives in modern times, the election has to be considered a disaster.

The interaction between the president's strategic position and his political strategy led to his downfall. Lulled into complacency by the public's response to the Gulf War, the White House lost the election in the autumn of 1991—not a year later. Inclined to stay above the political fray—a disposition that was reinforced by his advisers—Bush fell precipitously in the polls that autumn, a decline from which he never recovered.

Nevertheless, Bush persisted in refusing to set the agenda and structure the growing debate over economic policy, arguing that no economic initiative was needed. His ideology and the lack of budgetary resources restricted his room to maneuver, while the coalition that put him in office in 1988 began to unravel.

The fragile nature of his coalition was obvious. On the one hand, he had to undergo a bitter primary battle that reflected the GOP right wing's contempt for his moderation. On the other hand, his efforts to attract the Reagan Democrats were undermined by his predisposition against activist government and the lack of salience of social issues.

Pat Buchanan's prime-time speech opening the Republican Convention tells much of the story about the self-destructive nature of Bush's relations with the right wing. Although the White House had planned to stress "family values" in a positive light, Buchanan's strident speech began the proceedings on a note of intolerance that set the tone for press coverage of the convention. He vilified feminists, environmentalists, and homosexuals and tainted all that was to come (remarkably, he also drove Ronald Reagan out of prime time). Marilyn Quayle unintentionally reinforced the mean-spirited message with her own speech later in the convention.

Buchanan's oratory was at odds with the image of Bush as a man of broad and generous vision, and it moved the Bush presidency from one that had succeeded in attracting public support with the politics of inclusiveness to one that turned differences of opinion into a holy war. The "big tent" was flattened by the exclusiveness of the Right.

The campaign started on the family values theme, but it quickly was abandoned when the public viewed it as divisive. The advantage on the “values” issue was lost, Hillary Clinton’s ratings went up, and some socially liberal Republicans and Independents were alienated. In addition, the Reagan Democrats had other things on their minds.

All elections are focused ultimately around structuring the choices of voters. Candidates want voters to choose on the terms most favorable to themselves. In the broadest sense, the thrust of Bush’s appeal to the electorate was *trust* and the nature of his appeal was *fear*. On the other hand, Clinton emphasized *change* and *hope*. In hard times, the challenger’s message was stronger.

On a more specific level, Bush wanted to emphasize his credentials and success in foreign policy. Yet, issues of anti-communism, crisis leadership, and other aspects of foreign affairs, which had dominated public evaluations of the president for most of his tenure, were no longer salient in 1992 (Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1993). The agenda had changed to economic matters.

Ronald Reagan had appealed to many conservative Democrats on the basis of valence issues, such as morality, patriotism, anti-communism, and religious values. But when the economy stagnated, economics became more salient to Democrats of all stripes. Even conservative Democrats support some government action to stimulate the economy during hard times.

By the time of the campaign, however, Republican strategists concluded that it was too late to provide a positive rationale for electing George Bush. Aside from a widely-praised “agenda for American renewal” unveiled at a September 10 speech to the Detroit Economic Club, there was little emphasis on an economic plan.

Instead, the strategists insisted, they needed to go negative. In other words, the reason to reelect George Bush was to avoid being governed by Bill Clinton. Thus, the campaign emphasized trust and taxes. Although there was some responsiveness in the electorate to these themes, they could not make up for the lack of a compelling positive message, a reason to support Bush and not just oppose Clinton. And the attempts to stain Clinton confirmed the impression among many in the public that Bush was not serious about economic policy.

### **Conclusion**

Although some political commentators imply that all the president has to do to obtain the support of the public or Congress is to reach into his inventory of leadership skills and employ the appropriate means of

persuasion, such a view is naive. The president's strategic position dominates the persuasive presidency.

Successful leadership is not the result of the dominant chief executive of political folklore who restructures the contours of the political landscape, altering his strategic position to pave the way for change. Rather than creating the conditions for important shifts in public policy, the effective leader is the less heroic facilitator who works at the margins of coalition building to recognize and exploit opportunities presented by a favorable configuration of political forces.

The president is in a constant state of dependency on his environment for creating favorable strategic positions from which he can exercise leadership at the margins to turn opportunities into accomplishments. Given his strategic position, President Bush had fewer opportunities to exploit than most presidents. Under these circumstances, he turned to foreign policy, where his inclinations and expertise lay and where he had greater flexibility and more opportunities to leave his mark on history.

In general, the Bush presidency was a term devoted to consolidating the changes of the Reagan administration and dealing with the problems it left behind, rather than mobilizing a coalition behind bold new enterprises. It was a term of prudent stewardship, but not one that was oriented toward laying the groundwork for significant changes in domestic policy.

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