



The Legacy of the Bush Administration?

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By October, 15 months before his presidency would end, George Bush's approval ratings still hovered around 30 percent.

His administration will go down, say historians such as Columbia's Eric Foner and Princeton's Sean Wilentz, as a disaster. As Wilentz put it, "Many historians are now wondering whether Bush, in fact, will be remembered as the very worst president in all of American history."

A new genre in American popular culture has arisen comparing Bush to Hitler — on the Internet, and in fiction, stand-up comedy, and drama. To the novelist Garrison Keillor, Bush's Republicans are "brownshirts in pinstripes" — echoing Al Gore's similar slur of "digital brownshirts."

Even Bush's supporters seem resigned to such abuse. They now talk not of a restoration in public esteem before the president leaves office, but rather of a Trumanesque turnaround: a once-despised president only years later becomes appreciated for his unpopular but necessary decisions.

But for now, Bush seems to have an orphaned presidency defended by very few. From the left, he is criticized for his tax cuts for the rich, his lack of concern for African-American victims of Katrina, his illiberal homeland-security measures — and always for Iraq, with shrill persistent choruses of "pre-emption" and "unilateralism." Much of this anger against Bush is Pavlovian and superficial, deeply embedded within the president's

caricatured dead-or-alive, smoke-'em-out lingo.

As a result, the left gives the president no credit for policies that have irked his conservative base. In his first term, he increased federal spending at a faster rate than Bill Clinton. He extended the reach of federal education policy with his No Child Left Behind legislation, and he did not veto a single spending bill, instead sponsoring a major new prescription entitlement for Medicare recipients. His immigration bill, blasted by many conservatives, ultimately failed, but still won over Senator Ted Kennedy and infuriated red-state America.

So will Bush leave disgraced and confirm this prognosis of worst president? Probably not – and not merely because we have had far worse, from James Buchanan to Richard Nixon.

Start with the fountainhead of Bushophobia – the postwar reconstruction of Iraq. The surge that began in June seems to be working far better than anticipated. Should such tactical progress translate into strategic success – the verdict is still out – historians may conclude that George Bush removed the two worst regimes in the Middle East, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, and then successfully battled al-Qaeda terrorists in both countries in his pursuit of democratic reform. History could further record that he accomplished all this at far less the cost than the stalemate in Korea in the 1950s or the defeat in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s.

We also forget that the abuse heaped on past presidents while in office sometimes fades with perspective. A once-reviled Calvin Coolidge is generally assessed as a far better president than Lyndon Johnson. Ronald Reagan has been recently canonized, so we forget that during the Iran-Contra scandal there was talk of his impeachment. George H. W. Bush blew a 90 percent approval rating after the Gulf War and was blamed all through the 1990s for cynically not removing Saddam; now he is seen as a sober realist and globalist. Lauded today, Bill Clinton ended his tenure in disgrace.

The current stridency of Democratic presidential candidates is also starting to show Americans that easy criticism of a sitting president is not quite the same as assuming the responsibility of governing.

As the campaign wears on and exasperated Democrats continue to appeal to their base, the bystander president could be seen as a more sober and judicious statesman. And should a Republican candidate – all the frontrunners have more or less endorsed the president's Middle East agenda – be elected, it will provide a lame-duck Bush with a type of national approval for yet a third time.

Similarly, few have offered alternatives to most of the Bush initiatives. Neoconservatism is slandered as messianic and dangerous in its advocacy of democratic reform. Are we then to revert to amoral realism that tolerated Saddam Hussein in

the 1980s, or winked as the House of Saud funded madrassas that empowered global jihad? Or should we treat terrorism as a “criminal justice” matter? We did that serially in the 1990s, from the first World Trade Center bombing to the attack on the USS Cole – and earned 9/11 as the logical outcome of such appeasement.

In short, should we avoid another 9/11, see North Korea denuclearize, stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan, or perhaps catch Dr. Zawahiri and bin Laden, while the economy stays strong and our southern border with Mexico is closed – all possible in the next year and a quarter – George Bush could still leave office with a successful presidency.

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