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**Editor's Introduction**

***President George W. Bush***

Ronald M. Peters, Jr.

This issue of *Extensions* offers three articles examining the presidency of George W. Bush. As I write this article in mid-March, 2006, the president is experiencing the lowest sustained public approval ratings of his presidency. The litany of natural, political, administrative, and policy setbacks that have contributed to the steady erosion of his support among the American people are by now familiar, and include Iraq, Katrina, NSA wiretapping, Scooter Libby, and the Dubai port deal, among others. The president's low standing has led some observers to speculate that the window of opportunity for his administration has now closed.<sup>1</sup> Any final assessment of this presidency, or any other before it is over, is premature. Still, it is not premature to characterize what we have so far observed.

**Our Articles**

In his article, "Changing Their Minds," George Edwards draws upon his ongoing research on the ability of presidents to shape public opinion.<sup>2</sup> The fact that presidents do experience periods of very low public approval by itself indicates that a president's ability to effect public attitudes is constrained by the force of events and by other political actors; however, since Teddy Roosevelt, the presidency has been viewed as a bully pulpit from which presidents have a chance to move the public on particular issues of the day. The president's megaphone is, at least, larger and louder than any other. It would follow that a president must have some capacity to persuade the public to support his positions. If not, then of what might presidential leadership consist?

To examine this issue Edwards takes President Bush's two most important second term issues: the war in Iraq and Social Security reform. It seems as clear, as anything can be clear, that President Bush has staked his administration on his decision to invade Iraq and his administration's handling of the invasion and its aftermath. It also appears undeniable that Social Security reform including partial privatization of the system has been the major domestic policy initiative of his second administration, the issue upon which he intended to "expend the political capital" he believed that he had obtained by winning reelection. So, it is fair enough for Edwards to ask, how effective has the president been in influencing public opinion on these two cornerstone policies of his administration? He seeks to answer this question by examining polling results surrounding presidential public relations blitz's on each issue.

Edwards's answer is, "not very effective." Public support for the war in Iraq, for example, has waned over time. While Bush maintained public support for the war from the period of the run-up to the

invasion in 2002 through most of 2003, public opinion in 2004 began to shift against the administration's policies and the decline in public support continued in 2005. Specific efforts by the president to shore up public support did not interrupt or alter the trend line. The evident inference is that the public's perception of the reality on the ground in Iraq has had far more effect on its attitudes toward the administration's policies than any steps by the president or members of his administration to alter that perception or attitudes toward the war.

One might observe, of course, that for a very long time the public did support the invasion of Iraq because it accepted the administration's various claims about weapons of mass destruction or a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. As long as Saddam Hussein was an abstract threat formulated in the rhetoric of the administration, the public was prepared to support the invasion. The Iraq policy was captured in the reflected light of the war in Afghanistan and the public's concern about the terrorist threat more generally. With the emergence of the insurgency and a tenfold increase in the number of American deaths after the president declared major hostilities at an end, public attitudes were very likely to turn against the war and no rhetorical efforts have been able to change that. On the third anniversary of the invasion, the president has launched yet another public relations campaign to bolster public support for the war. Polls taken during the first week in March indicate that his approval ratings and public support for the war have reached new lows. This will present yet another test of Edwards's analysis.

Social Security reform offers a similar conclusion derived from a rather different set of facts. President Bush's initial foray was to sell the public on the notion that the Social Security system was "bankrupt" and that a major overhaul was needed in order to make it solvent. His proposed reform depended on diverting a percentage of the payroll tax into private investment accounts on a voluntary basis among younger workers. Bush succeeded to some extent in convincing Americans that there is an impending problem, but he never won any substantial support for his privatization scheme. His 60-day blitz had, according to Edwards's analysis, no effect. In the case of Social Security, America was not facing facts on the ground in quite the same way that it did the war in Iraq. The problems lie in the future, and Social Security remains a very popular program among Americans. The absence of an immediate crisis and Americans' skepticism about privatizing the system doomed Bush's efforts to win public support for his plan.

Edwards's stresses that in each of these cases the White House strategy encompassed far more than just a few speeches by the president. The full array of campaign strategies that had been honed in the 2000 and 2004 campaigns were deployed in support of the president's policies. And this may have been a fatal flaw in the White House's approach. Karl Rove's strategy of appealing to the GOP base proved sufficient to win two very narrow national elections, but it is not well designed to convert skeptics of the administration's policies. President Bush's audiences are notably absent anyone who might disagree with his policies. It is hard to move the opinions of those to whom one refuses to speak. Thus, support for Social Security reform and for the president's policy in Iraq has remained high among only those voters who were inclined to support the policies in the first place. A pulpit yes, a bully pulpit no.

The strategy of appealing to the base of the Republican Party also guided the Bush administration in its dealings with the Congress, according to Stephen Wayne. Wayne characterizes the relationship between the Bush White House during the first administration as "cooperation without consultation," and during the second term so far as "no cooperation without consultation." The Bush administration has been described by Republican Congressman Tom Davis of Virginia as the least consultative in modern American history, and Wayne's analysis would seem to support this characterization. The fact that the Bush administration and the Republican Congress have worked cooperatively should come as no surprise. When the presidency and the Congress are controlled by the same political party, the degree of cooperation will naturally be higher than when the two parties divide control of our elected institutions.

Cooperation is not, of course, guaranteed, as witness the difficulties experienced by President Carter; but even he had a relatively high success rate as measured by presidential support scores in the Congress.

After having tilted with President Clinton for six years, congressional Republicans entered nirvana in 2001 with control of the White House, the House, and (after a temporary interruption due to Senator Jeffords's defection) the Senate. I had an opportunity to interview Speaker Hastert in 2001 and he stressed the advantages of working with a Republican administration.

For the Bush administration, however, cooperation does not imply consultation. Instead, the consistent tendency of the Bush White House has been to stake out a preferred position and to ram it through the Congress while accepting only necessary compromise. The House of Representatives has facilitated this approach. It has been more pliant than the Senate. One reason why President Bush has yet to veto a bill is that Speaker Hastert has resolved to send him nothing that he might veto. The Congress has more often bent to the administration rather than the administration yielding to Congress.

This strategy has often proved successful. The typical pattern is for the House to pass the administration's bill, for the Senate to produce some watered down compromise, and then for the Republicans to substantially rewrite the bill in conference, in hopes of ramming the conference report through both houses on a narrow partisan vote. Congressional Republicans, and especially House Republicans, have been eager to take direction from the White House in framing policy and politics. Vice President Cheney meets regularly with Senate Republicans and the House Republican leadership. Message coordination takes place during weekly meetings between administration and congressional leadership staff.

As Wayne notes, this pattern held firm during the first Bush administration, but has begun to break down during Bush's second term. Congressional Republicans came to see their electoral prospects diverging from the preferences of an increasingly unpopular and apparently ham-handed administration. The Congress repudiated Bush's Social Security reform plan by allowing it to die, killed an administration intelligence reform bill, resisted his immigration proposals, forced through an anti-torture amendment, revised the Patriot Act and, most recently, killed the Dubai port deal. According to Wayne, the tactics that had worked for four years proved no longer effective.

Wayne identifies two major factors at play. The first is Bush's stubbornness; he has been reluctant to adjust his approach to the Congress in light of the new situation in which he finds himself. The second is the lame-duck effect, an important aspect of that new situation. As the president enters the heart of the 2006 legislative calendar, the politics of the 2006 congressional elections have narrowed his options. With an intractable war in Iraq and an increasingly resistant Congress, prospects for major legislative accomplishments appear dim.

For this reason, President Bush has a strong incentive to pursue his policy aims through administrative actions that he can undertake on his own. This will hardly be a new tactic for the Bush administration, as Shirley Warshaw explains in her article on President Bush's administrative strategies. From the beginning of his administration, President Bush has aggressively used his appointment powers, executive orders, executive agreements, and presidential signing statements to advance his policy goals. The assertive use of presidential powers has been central to this administration's understanding of the role of the executive in our constitutional system. President Bush and key members of his administration, including especially Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld have the specific objective of restoring the power and independence of the executive branch. This attitude helps explain the administration's decisions to extend NSA wiretapping to domestic targets in apparent contravention of the FISA law and to approve the sale of U.S. Port operations to firms controlled by the government of Dubai. The administration wants to inhibit access to the papers of former presidents, to issue signing statements that offer administration interpretations of statutes, to avoid U.S. courts in prosecuting the war

on terror, to insist that its nominees have the “right” to an up or down vote in the Senate, to possess a line-item veto on spending bills, and so forth. The administration has gone further than any previous administration in asserting control over the regulatory process, and has sought to roll back statutory requirements through regulation, as in the case of the new source review process under the Clean Air Act.

Has the Bush administration crossed the constitutional line separating the powers of the three branches of the government? Scholars will no doubt devote much attention to this question in the years ahead. But whatever their conclusions might be, it will not be the scholars who finally decide how far this or any other administration may go in asserting executive power. It will, Warshaw suggests, be the American people who decide that question at the ballot box. President Bush has asserted power in the face of a notably compliant Republican Congress. The solution to an aggressive administration is an opposition Congress willing to hold it to account.

### **Assessing the Bush Presidency**

How, then, are we to assess the presidency of George W. Bush? Presidential scholar Stephen Skowronek has characterized Bush as an affiliate of the reconstructive regime of Ronald Reagan.<sup>3</sup> As a regime affiliate, Bush has little choice but to be an orthodox innovator, carrying forward the aims of the Reagan Revolution. At the same time, as Skowronek notes, Bush has sought to define his presidency by the firmness of its judgments. He appears to believe that he has been selected by larger forces to lead the country, and his leadership ambitions appear in some respects to diverge, perhaps exceed, those of Reagan.

In assessing the long-term impact of a president, we may look in four areas: politics, policy, power, and personal reputation. This president has wanted to be consequential; he always speaks in terms of big ideas, big initiatives, and big achievements. In politics, Bush has sought to bring about the culmination of a realignment begun but not completed by Ronald Reagan. He wants to be the president who has locked in a Republican governing majority for the next generation. In policy, he has wanted to complete cornerstones of the Reagan Revolution by cutting taxes and reducing regulation. With respect to power, he has sought to reestablish the authority and autonomy of the executive branch vis-à-vis the legislative and judicial branches. With respect to his personal reputation, he has sought to portray himself as a conservative populist and a decisive leader. Let us consider each of these four dimensions of the Bush presidency in turn.

### **Realigning American Politics**

President Bush’s aspiration to realign American politics has certainly met with some success, if one measures success in terms of partisan control of institutions. However, realignment theory is usually expressed in terms of underlying political allegiance and not simply institutional control. There is, of course, an assumption that, over time, political allegiance and institutional control will go hand-in-hand; this is, after all, the premise of democracy. Thus, the New Deal realignment created an enduring Democratic majority that placed the party in power in the Congress during most of the sixty years following FDR’s election, gave the Democrats control of the White House more often than not for fifty years, and enabled the party to establish a liberal majority on the Supreme Court that dominated its policymaking from 1937 through the 1970s. The Republicans will have held the White House for twenty of the last twenty eight years, the Congress for at least twelve years, and have ensconced what appears to be a narrow majority on the Supreme Court. So, the superficial indices of political realignment are at hand.

However, underlying this superstructure is an electorate that is in fact closely divided. President Bush, as Steven Wayne notes, has governed from the right and not from the center. He has divided the

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Ronald M. Peters, Jr., “President George W. Bush,” *Extensions*, Spring 2006. Copyright, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma. All rights reserved.

country rather than uniting it. As noted above, he has chosen to wrap himself in his party's base voters, rather than to reach out to moderates and independents, who might have been brought under the Republican umbrella. The Republicans have sustained their majority through a variety of contrivances that are equally available to the Democrats, should they win control of the White House, House, or Senate.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, much contemporary research suggests that the electorate is not really as polarized as are the base voters in each party.<sup>5</sup> It seems possible that a president who could reach out and claim that middle ground might initiate the kind of long-term electoral realignment that Bush and his advisors covet. It will be hard for President Bush to do this so long as he only wants to appear in front of screened audiences of Republican base voters.<sup>6</sup>

### **Reshaping Policy**

The Bush administration has been able to move public policy, although in odd ways. If the Reagan Revolution was all about smaller and less expensive government, or about the federal government deferring to the states, then Bush has certainly not sought to complete Reagan's task. His is the biggest spending administration since LBJ, his education bill seeks to federalize education policy and to double federal spending on education, and in areas as diverse as agriculture, transportation, energy, health, and finance, he has presided over Republican initiatives that have delivered benefits to special interests. This government is not smaller; it simply distributes its largess to a different category of recipients. The one area in which President Bush is most apt to present himself as a disciple of President Reagan is tax cuts. He appears to forget that once the Reagan administration had recognized that its tax cuts were producing substantial federal deficits (due to the "triumph of politics," in David Stockman's term), Reagan proceeded to raise taxes several times. The Reagan and Bush 41 administrations also participated in the various bipartisan efforts to reduce the federal deficit via the congressional budget process and its use of deficit targets and pay-go rules. The rapidly increasing national debt and the emerging recalcitrance of conservative Republicans makes it appear likely that a substantial change in policy direction may be undertaken either during the balance of Bush's term or in the next administration.

President Bush has had considerable success in reshaping public policy in the regulatory process. Through the use of executive orders, new and revised regulations, new regulatory interpretations, and the use of prompt and return letters from the OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, the administration has sharply curtailed the growth of new regulation and has initiated rollbacks of regulations that had been adopted during prior administrations or were in process when Bush took office. The advantage of administrative policymaking of this sort is that a presidential administration can proceed with fewer impediments. Court review takes considerable time and the Republican Congress has been lax in its oversight, no doubt due to the fact that congressional Republicans share the president's policy objectives. There is, however, an obvious disadvantage of policymaking via executive action. What the present administration gives or takes away, a future administration may reverse. This has certainly been true in many areas in which President Bush reversed policies of the Clinton administration, and may prove equally true when the next presidential administration reviews the handiwork of its predecessor.

Although Bush sought the presidency in 2000 while downplaying the significance of foreign policy, it now seems certain that his place in history will be determined primarily by the long-term impact of the invasion of Iraq. Whatever may have been the original motivations of the invasion, the eventual rationale has been tied to foreign policy objectives that are breathtaking in scope. The recently issued National Security Strategy starts out this way: "It is the policy of the United States to seek and support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."<sup>7</sup> Ronald Reagan had the more modest goal of bringing down the Soviet Union. As noted, as the administration's updated National Security Strategy was being issued, the president was on

the road in a public relations blitz to shore up support for the war. George W. Bush has, then, staked his place in history on a foreign policy the consequences of which, as he has acknowledged, will not be well understood for many years. Bush's preemption doctrine replaced Truman's containment doctrine, and the president can only hope that history will come to regard the new foreign policy as well as it has the one it replaced.

### **Institutional Power**

With respect to both politics and policy, then, we may say that the prospects for an enduring Bush legacy appear mixed. What about institutional power? Here, it seems to me, Bush's prospects are better. The president has been intent on recovering executive power from the depths to which he thinks it had fallen in the post-Watergate/Vietnam era. Whether it be war powers, executive privilege, access to information, congressional oversight, presidential signing statements, circumventing the courts, bypassing administrative procedures, ignoring the plain language of statutes... the list could be extended at some length... Bush has been out to craft a more powerful presidency. There are two reasons why this effort may have some enduring consequences. First, it is consistent with a long-term trend towards enhanced executive power under the Constitution. While Bush may believe that he is taking the executive branch back to the good old days, in fact, the presidency was institutionally weaker during FDR's administration than it was under that of LBJ, and institutionally weaker under LBJ than under Ronald Reagan, Vietnam and Watergate to the contrary notwithstanding. The rise of the welfare state, the Cold War, and now the so-called War on Terror have led to a seemingly inexorable growth in institutional power of which Bush is as much the beneficiary as he is the cause. Presidents recognize this, and this is the second reason why Bush's precedents are likely to be sustained by future administrations, Republican or Democrat. There is, after all, an inherent institutional interest shared by all presidents, regardless of party, in maintaining and enhancing presidential power. Take one clear example. During the Reagan and Bush 41 administrations, Democrats railed over the use of OMB/OIRA to constrain and roll back federal regulations. When President Clinton came into office, he expanded rather than contracted the role of OMB in the regulatory process. To be sure, Clinton had different policy objectives than had his two immediate predecessors; but his attachment to presidential power was as strong.

The one difference between President Clinton and President Bush is that Clinton dealt with a Congress controlled by the opposition party, one that was out to get him. Bush has enjoyed a Congress controlled by his own party. That has enabled him to assert presidential power without fear of being challenged by the Congress in most instances. Obviously, a Democratic takeover of either the House or the Senate in 2006 would change this situation immediately.

### **Presidential Personality**

The final grounds on which President Bush is likely to be assessed by historians are his personal qualities and capacities. Decoding Bill Clinton will prove relatively easy. The Clinton administration was all about Bill Clinton; a little Freudian psychology will carry the analysis a long way. But it is not as clear that the Bush administration is all about George Bush. President Bush's decentralized, sometimes detached, approach to office has carved out a greater role for subordinates, especially Vice President Cheney. Historians will have to sort out the roles played by these various characters in the Bush drama. We will see if he is regarded as either the Horatius or the Hamlet of his own administration. While he likes to present himself as an uncomplicated leader in the manner of Harry Truman, there is much about President Bush that seems quite complicated indeed. Here we have an emphatically anti-intellectual president who has allowed the most defining policy of his administration to be shaped by a group of neo-conservative intellectuals whose academic antecedents the president himself would appear to disdain.

Here we have a born-again Protestant whose foreign and domestic policies have been profoundly influenced by several secular, Jewish intellectuals and whose two Supreme Court nominees have been Roman Catholic. Here we have a president who wanted to be a uniter and not a divider, who has become the most polarizing president in recent memory (recall that both LBJ and Richard Nixon were reelected by landslides). Here we have a president who said he wanted to reduce the size and scope of the federal government, and who has instead substantially increased it, doubling the national debt in the process. Here we have a president who stepped into the breach after 9/11, and who rode his bicycle after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast. And here we have a president who had the guts to gamble it all – his country, his legacy, and his place in history – on a roll of the dice in a faraway place that, even today, most Americans can probably not identify on a map. We cannot now know if George W. Bush will prove to be a consequential president, as he might hope; but we can now know that his will be among the most interesting presidencies.

### Endnotes

1. John K. White, “The Death of a Presidency,” *The Forum*, Volume 3, Issue 4, Article 2 (The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2006).
2. George C. Edwards, *On Deaf Ears* (Yale University Press, 2003).
3. Stephen Skowronek, “Leadership by Definition; First Term Reflections on George W. Bush’s Political Stance,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Volume 3, Number 4, 817-831.
4. Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center* (Yale University Press, 2006). This book’s tone is unnecessarily polemical to sustain its generally accurate characterization of the practices it portrays.
- <sup>1</sup> Wayne Baker, *America’s Crisis of Values*, (Princeton University Press, 2005); Morris Fiorina, *Culture War?* 2nd ed. (Pearson-Longman, 2006).
5. Wayne Baker, *America’s Crisis of Values*, (Princeton University Press, 2005); Morris Fiorina, *Culture War?* 2nd ed. (Pearson-Longman, 2006).
6. Perhaps recognizing this, President Bush’s March 2006 effort to win support for the war in Iraq involved an appearance in Cleveland at which the President took unscreened questions from the audience followed by a press conference the next day.
7. *The National Security Strategy of the United States*. March 2006, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2006/>.

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**Return to Contents**

**Special Orders**