

A TRAGIC LEGACY

How a Good vs. Evil Mentality Destroyed
the Bush Presidency

Glenn Greenwald



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CROWN PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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PREFACE

Let me just first tell you that I've never been more convinced that the decisions I made are the right decisions.

—GEORGE W. BUSH, September 12, 2006,
speaking to a group of right-wing pundits in the White House

I do not think much of a man who is not wiser today than he was yesterday.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The attacks of September 11 presented George Bush with a rare opportunity of historic proportion. Virtually overnight, he led a suddenly unified and purposeful citizenry that was prepared—even eager—to set aside the petty though intense partisan wars which had plagued the country for the prior two decades, and once again focus on the nation's core values and shared political principles, the ones which transcend ideological differences and which make America so worth defending.

The president's principled and eloquent post-9/11 rhetoric solidified this unity and ensured that the vast bulk of Americans—Republicans, Democrats, and Independents—would loyally support both him and his policies over the course of the next two years. There are very few periods in American presidential history, if there are any, that compare to the widespread popularity and unchallenged power George Bush amassed—not only in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks but also up to, including, and for some time following the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. Few presidents have soared as high or commanded such unthwarted power as did the post-9/11 George W. Bush.

And yet, as the end of his presidency approached, historians and political figures from across the ideological spectrum—including many of his previously most fervent supporters—were speaking of the Bush legacy as one of colossal failure. As President Bush entered his lame-duck term, few presidents in American history had ever been as isolated or as unpopular for such a sustained duration. Democrats and Independents intensely and irreversibly disapproved of his presidency, and drove off previously loyal Republicans—both political leaders and rank-and-file—abandoned him as well.

The sheer scope of the collapse of the Bush presidency is most dramatically illustrated by comparing the two midterm elections that took place during his tenure. In 2002, the Republican Party was able to ride President Bush's potent personal popularity to a truly historic victory in the midterm elections, as it seized control of the Senate and increased substantially its control of the House—an extremely rare feat for a sitting president's party. Yet the 2006 midterm election produced the

precisely opposite outcome for Republicans: a crashing and shattering defeat, universally attributed to the country's deep dislike of the president and his signature, legacy policy—the invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq. The heights to which George Bush ascended in the first few years of his presidency were matched only by the severe depths to which he plunged.

How and why did the Bush administration squander its deep-seated and seemingly intractable popularity? How and why did the president tragically waste the opportunity to restore at least some enduring unity in the American populace and rejuvenate a shared sense of national identity and purpose? This book explores these questions by examining the Bush legacy—a legacy of profound failure, chaos, and incalculable, perhaps unprecedented, damage to the country.

The Bush legacy is tragic because its outcome was far from inevitable. Historical circumstances created an opportunity for lasting achievement, but the president's chosen Manichean worldview, accompanied by his suffocatingly rigid conviction in his own Rightness, steered the country on a course of disaster and literally prevented him from modifying that course, let alone choosing another, even as inescapable evidence of his own failures mounted.

The steep and powerful rise of the Bush presidency, and its abrupt and cataclysmic collapse, are examined and documented in chapter 1. As that chapter demonstrates, it is genuinely difficult to overstate the extent to which the country has repudiated George Bush.

Following the resounding 2006 midterm defeat, the president's approval ratings neared the level of Richard Nixon's when he was forced from office in disgrace. President Bush's isolation and abandonment became so severe that even red-state Republican officeholders facing re-election were forced to offer their constituents proof that they vigorously opposed Bush and his policies, and even more tellingly, the movement that was most responsible for Bush's twice being elected as president—and that chose him as its standard-bearer—political conservatism—undertook a full-blown effort to disassociate George Bush from their ideology by suddenly claiming that, all along, Bush was never a "real conservative."

Elite political pundits who had supported both the president and his war literally began denying having done so. President Bush became such a radioactive commodity—such a clear consensus had arisen that he was one of the worst presidents, if not the single worst president, in American history—that disassociating oneself from him became a matter of political survival and a prerequisite for preserving any remnants of credibility.

The core principles and decision-making patterns that drove George Bush and engendered the collapse of his presidency are examined in chapter 2. Despite the continuous and enthusiastic embrace of Bush by the vast bulk of political conservatives, it has long been vividly clear that the president (just as was true for Ronald Reagan) simply does not govern in accordance with the claimed principles of political conservatism as they exist in their "pure," abstract form. George Bush has presided over massive increases in domestic spending, the conversion of a multibillion-dollar surplus into an even larger deficit, the creation of vast new bureaucratic fiefdoms, an unprecedented expansion of the power of the federal government, governmental intrusions into multiple areas previously preserved for the states or off-limits altogether, and a wanton disregard for the rule of law. Whatever political philosophy has propelled George Bush's governance, it is not the abstract tenets of Goldwater/small

government conservatism.

Instead, what lies at the heart of the Bush presidency is an absolutist worldview capable of understanding all issues and challenges only in the moralistic, overly simplistic, and often inapplicable terms of “Good vs. Evil.” The president is driven by his core conviction that he has found the Good, that he is a crusader for it, that anything is justified in pursuit of it, and that anything which impedes his decision-making is, by definition, a deliberate or unwitting ally of Evil. This mentality has single-handedly prevented him from governing, changing course, and even engaging realities that deviate from those convictions. The president’s description of himself as “the Decider” is accurate. His mind-set has dominated the American political landscape throughout his presidency, and virtually all significant events of the Bush Era are a by-product of his core Manichean mentality.

Chapter 3 examines how this mind-set led the United States into disaster in Iraq and subsequently ensured a brutal, entirely counterproductive and seemingly endless occupation. Chapter 4 details how precisely this same mind-set, clung to as tenaciously as ever before by the president, has also placed the country on a potentially even more disastrous, and seemingly inevitable, collision course with Iran.

As those two chapters demonstrate, the president became convinced, by a variety of disparate factions which influenced him, that those countries and their leaders were literally the embodiment of “ultimate Evil”—the equivalent of Adolf Hitler—and that full-scale destruction of the “enemies” via an unrelenting war was and is the only viable option. That single-minded conviction remained—and continues to remain—in place even as its obvious failures became glaringly evident and even as constraints of resources and other realities rendered pursuit of that militaristic course plainly disastrous. The discussion in these chapters includes an examination of how the country’s key political institutions—led by the national media—came to enable and even embrace the president’s moralistic mentality, thereby precluding any meaningful debate or rational examination for the courses he chose.

Chapter 5 examines the ultimate tragic irony of George Bush’s Manichean morality—namely, that embracing a core, unshakable conviction of one’s own rightness legitimizes, and even renders inevitable, some of the most amoral and ethically monstrous policies, justified as necessary means to achieve a morally imperative end. The Bush presidency, awash in moralistic rhetoric, has ushered in some of the most extremist, previously unthinkable and profoundly un-American practices—from indefinite, lawless detentions, to the use of torture, to bloody preventive wars of choice, to the abduction of innocent people literally off the street or from their homes, to radical new theories designed to vest in the president the power to break the law.

These measures were pursued not despite the moralistic roots of the president’s agenda, but *because* of them. Those who believe that they are on the path of righteousness, who are crusaders for the objective Good, will frequently become convinced that there can be no limitations on the weapons used to achieve their ends. The moral imperative of their agenda justifies—even requires—all steps undertaken to fulfill it. As the president ceaselessly proclaimed the Goodness at the heart of America’s destiny and its role in the world, his actions have resulted in an almost full-scale destruction of America’s moral credibility in almost every country and on every continent. The same president who has insisted that core moralism drives him has brought America to its lowest moral

standing in history.

The final chapter, chapter 6, places the Bush legacy in historical context, and finds that only one modern president can remotely be compared to Bush in terms of how isolated, weakened, and unpopular Bush has become: the Vietnam-plagued Lyndon Johnson. But whereas Johnson had a string of widely admired and long-lasting domestic achievements, Bush has virtually none.

The damage of Johnson's one-term presidency was contained by his decision not to seek re-election, a decision mandated by intense opposition from every sector of the country, including Johnson's own party. Bush, however, will have wielded power for eight long, highly eventful years—fueled by a Congress controlled by loyalists in his party, a generally docile press, and a political movement that rarely opposed any decision he made. For that reason, and in stark contrast to the far more contained impact of the Johnson administration, the Bush presidency has transformed the national character of the United States and fundamentally altered how the world perceives our country.

It is always crucial for a nation that has endured—and allowed—such radical change to understand why it has occurred. And, in every case, the value of understanding what drives an American presidency is self-evident. But in the case of the Bush presidency—undoubtedly one of the most consequential presidencies in American history—the task of examining its dynamics and its legacy is vital for an entirely separate reason.

George W. Bush is a single individual, who will permanently leave the American political stage on January 20, 2009. But the political movement that transformed Bush into an icon—and which loyalists supported, glorified, and sustained him—is not going anywhere. Bush is but a by-product and a perfect reflection of that movement, one which has been weakened and diminished by Bush's staggering unpopularity but is far from dead. It intends to rejuvenate itself by finding a new leader, one who appears cosmetically different from the deeply unpopular Bush, but who, in reality, shares Bush's fundamental beliefs about the world (which are the core beliefs of that movement) and who intends to follow the same disastrous course Bush has chosen for this country.

To understand Bush and his presidency, then, is not merely a matter of historical interest. Examining the dynamic driving his presidency is also vital for understanding the right-wing political movement that has dominated our political landscape since the mid-1990s—a movement that calls itself “conservative” but which, as many traditional conservatives have themselves complained, has no actual allegiance to the political principles for which conservatism claims to stand. That is the movement that George Bush has come to embody, and the attributes of the Bush presidency, the ones which have spawned such a tragic legacy for our country, are the same attributes driving the movement that created, supported, and sustained that presidency.

The values and principles on which America was founded are far greater than any single president's. American ideals—those to which the country has long aspired (if not always perfectly followed)—transcend the damage that any one presidency can inflict, even in eight years. But a thorough understanding of the Bush era is indispensable in attempting to reverse and repair the damage wrought by the legacy of George W. Bush's tragic presidency, to reaffirm the defining values of our country, and to restore America's strength and credibility in the world.

Bush Agonistes

86 • 66 • 59 • 48 • 39 • 32

Those numbers designate the percentages of Americans who approved of George W. Bush's performance as president in late 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006, respectively. This data, from *Washington Post*–ABC News polls, demonstrate that every year George Bush has remained in office, fewer and fewer Americans have approved of the job he has done, and more and more Americans have become dissatisfied with his presidency.

And it is not merely the quantity but also the intensity of the disapproval that has steadily increased. The percentages of Americans who “strongly disapprove” have risen dramatically from the end of 2001 to the end of 2006: 6, 20, 29, 38, 47, 53. And the group consisting of the president’s most enthusiastic supporters—those who “strongly approve” of his performance—has shrunk year after year: 64, 45, 39, 27, 20, 18.

The dramatic shift in the public’s perceptions of George Bush is unsurprising in light of what a consequential presidency this has been. Among admirers and opponents of George Bush, there are an exceedingly few grounds for agreement. But few Americans, regardless of their political leanings, would dispute that the impact of the Bush presidency on America will be both profound and long-lasting.

During Bush’s tenure, the United States suffered the first major foreign terrorist attack on its soil. The U.S. invaded two sovereign nations—one which had an integral connection to that attack and one which had none—followed by a violent and protracted occupation of both countries with no end in sight. Beyond Iraq, the Bush administration has been directing increasingly threatening rhetoric toward yet more countries, particularly Iran, the most powerful Middle Eastern nation other than Israel. Yet by the end of 2006, all of the demands on America’s armed forces had resulted in a military that was stretched so thin that new missions were and remain all but unthinkable. Prominent politicians in both parties were calling for a significant expansion of the U.S. military based on the expectation that far more missions lie ahead.

Subsequent to 9/11, the Bush administration constructed a super-maximum security prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, which it declared beyond the reach of any law, and the image of its orange-clad, bowed, and shackled prisoners became a symbol of anti-American resentment around the world. The president’s lawyers engaged in a series of legal battles to defend unprecedented theories of a virtually limitless presidential power, which the president applied not only to foreign nationals but

also to American citizens, including those on U.S. soil. Immediately prior to being voted out of office, the Republicans who controlled Congress enacted a law vesting in the president sweeping new powers of indefinite detention and coercive interrogation.

Throughout the Bush tenure, the U.S. military and intelligence agencies sent terrorist suspects to secret prisons, so-called black sites, throughout Eastern Europe. They abducted citizens off the streets of other nations—including those of America’s own allies—and sent them for interrogation to countries notorious for the use of torture. World opinion toward America underwent a fundamental shift as anti-American sentiment reached an all-time high, spreading throughout most countries and on every continent.

Multiple bombing campaigns and other U.S. military assaults have undoubtedly killed scores of Al Qaeda members, along with tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of innocents. Al Qaeda’s ability to operate freely in Afghanistan has surely been impeded, and—other than the now-forgotten though still-unsolved series of deadly anthrax attacks in 2001 aimed at political leaders and prominent journalists—there have been no further terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, nor any convincing evidence of a serious, formidable plot to perpetrate one. However, the leader of Al Qaeda at the time of the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden, has been neither apprehended nor killed, at least to the administration’s knowledge. By all accounts, Al Qaeda’s Taliban allies are resurgent, and Al Qaeda has exploited the chaos caused by the removal of Iraq’s government to operate within a portion of Western Iraq. As the president entered lame-duck status, his vows to prosecute the “war”—encompassing not only Iraq but a whole host of other nations and groups—transformed into threats to escalate it further still.

Even without further increases in military spending, and even though the United States is the world’s sole superpower, military spending has skyrocketed under the Bush presidency. In early 2001, the Bush Pentagon sent to Congress a request for a \$622 billion defense budget, only \$141 billion of which was to be devoted to Iraq and Afghanistan. Even with inflation adjustments, and as the U.S. continues to swelter under massive budget deficits, that proposed amount for defense spending is the highest since World War II. The amount of “peacetime” defense spending, and the overall expenditures for defense, has increased every year during the Bush administration. The U.S., by itself, accounts for more than 50 percent of *total* worldwide military spending. The U.S. military budget is larger than the total spending of the next twenty largest spenders combined, and its military budget under Bush is six times larger than that of China, the country with the second-highest defense budget. The seemingly endless expansion of American military spending reflects an intent not merely to defend America from attacks but also to occupy and rule large parts of the world—particularly the Middle East—as an imperial power.

It is difficult to argue with the conclusion of Bush admirer John Podhoretz, who contended—in his 2004 literary homage to Bush’s greatness entitled *Bush Country: How Dubya Became a Great President While Driving Liberals Insane*—that the president has “constructed one of the most consequential presidencies in the nation’s history.” In an article highly critical of the president’s governance, former Reagan and Bush 41 speechwriter Peggy Noonan observed in a September 2001 *Wall Street Journal* column that Americans generally agree that the president either “is a great man or a catastrophe,” but nothing in the middle, and she added:

The one thing I think America agrees on is that George Bush and his presidency have been

enormously consequential. He has made decisions that will shape the future we'll inhabit. It's never "We must do this" with Mr. Bush. It's always "the concentrated work of generations." He doesn't declare, he commits; and when you back him, you're never making a discrete and specific decision, you're always making a long-term investment.

Thomas Mann, senior fellow of governance studies at the Brookings Institution, observed that "George Bush will go down in history as one of the most consequential presidents in American history." For better or for worse, the Bush presidency will have long-lasting effects for America. The legacy of George W. Bush will be the legacy of the United States for some time to come.

THE ARC OF ICARUS

The Bush presidency, perhaps more than any other in American history, has been shaped by a single event. The September 11 attacks presented an opportunity for leadership and for renewing American unity and sense of purpose greater than any event since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. And even the president's most virulent critics would likely agree that this was an opportunity which the president seized—decisively and aggressively. In the aftermath of those attacks, a president who was elected with three million fewer votes than his opponent and who presided over a deeply divided electorate, commanded one of the most unified and resolute American citizenries in history. In the wake of 9/11, support for President Bush spanned the political spectrum and was abundant and enthusiastic in both political parties.

Support for the president suffered a slow, natural erosion from the 90 percent level he enjoyed in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. A portion of that early support was a fleeting, ephemeral by-product of a traumatized and angry nation. But the bulk was solid and sustained, resulting in an intense desire on the part of most Americans for the president to succeed. Most of the post-9/11 support for President Bush and his policies was both genuine and committed.

Thus, over the course of the next two years—through the March 2003 invasion of Iraq and for at least six months thereafter—the president's approval ratings never fell below 60 percent, and generally remained in the 66 percent range; fully two-thirds of the American public continued to endorse his job performance. Manifestly, Americans of many political stripes remained joined in a common cause, standing behind their president through this period.

And the profound depth and breadth of that support, of that national coming together, enabled him to take any action, request any legislation, obtain any new executive powers with no meaningful opposition. Throughout late 2001 and 2002, true bipartisanship (for better or worse) reigned in Congress, engendering a near total absence of controversy and the enactment of laws bestowing on the president broad new powers. Criticism of the president was negligible in the political mainstream. Most opposition came from factions that were successfully stigmatized and relegated to the relative inconsequential fringes.

Beginning in mid-2002 and continuing for the rest of the year, the president devoted himself almost

exclusively to insisting that Saddam Hussein's Iraq constituted a grave threat to the United States and must be confronted. Standing on his broad-based support, he campaigned to persuade Americans of the wisdom and necessity of invading Iraq, notwithstanding that Iraq had not attacked, had not threatened to attack, and lacked the capability to attack the United States.

The audacity of preemptively invading another country was no match for George Bush's popularity. The trust and faith placed by Americans in the president assured that the outcome of the "debate" over going to war against Iraq was preordained. As had been true with virtually every issue, large and small, foreign and domestic, since the 9/11 attacks, the president's will would prevail.

In the midst of the Iraq debate, and largely because of it, the president's soaring popularity also delivered, in November 2002, a resounding victory for his party in the midterm elections. Typically, and for many reasons, a president's party loses Congressional seats in midterm elections, but not in 2002. The Republicans took over control of the Senate from the Democrats and increased their control in the House.

The magnitude of their victory was historic. It had been almost seventy years—the 1934 midterm elections during Franklin Roosevelt's first term—since a president's party had gained strength in both the House and the Senate in a midterm election. Bush's sky-high approval numbers reached into state elections as well. After the 2002 elections, Republican governors outnumbered Democratic governors for the first time in fifty years.

The Republicans' extraordinary national victory was plainly the by-product of the towering popularity of President Bush, buttressed by his bellicose posture toward Iraq, which became the centerpiece of the 2002 campaign. The nation had coalesced behind its president, and even though he was not on the ballot, the deep faith placed in his leadership among Republicans, Independents, and even many Democrats led to a historic victory for his party.

The president's popularity cannot be attributed exclusively to the happenstance of the 9/11 attacks. Particularly in the weeks and even months following those attacks, much of the president's conduct generated confidence both in his abilities and in his judgment. As it appeared at the time, the invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent overthrow of the Taliban was a creatively executed and rapid success. Moreover, although his initial post-9/11 appearances were shaky, the president's speeches quickly became resolute, eloquent, and even inspiring. He expressed a focused and restrained anger but steadfastly avoided vengeful rhetoric. He pledged to pursue the planners and perpetrators of the attack relentlessly, but appeared to eschew rash or reckless overreaction.

And the president repeatedly emphasized that the enemy was defined neither as adherents to Islam nor as Middle Eastern countries and their citizens, but instead was a band of fanatics who exploited Islam as a pretext for terrorism and violence. In his September 20, 2001, speech to the Joint Session of Congress, he declared:

Americans are asking: Who attacked our country? The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as al Qaeda. They are the same murderers indicted for bombing American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, and responsible for bombing the USS *Cole*....

The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics—a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam.

And in the midst of emerging, isolated reports that American Muslims (or those perceived to be such) were the victims of attacks, and even of murder, the president pointedly emphasized:

I ask you to uphold the values of America, and remember why so many have come here. *We are in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them* [emphasis added]. No one should be singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith. *(Applause.)*

Three days earlier, President Bush had purposefully made a public appearance at the Islamic Center in Washington and afterward delivered this pointed statement:

Those who feel like they can intimidate our fellow citizens to take out their anger don't represent the best of America. They represent the worst of humankind, and they should be ashamed of that kind of behavior. This is a great country. It's a great country because we share the same values of respect and dignity and human worth. And it is my honor to be meeting with leaders who feel the same way I do. They are outraged. They are sad. They love America just as much as I do....

Women who cover their heads in this country must feel comfortable going outside their homes. Moms who wear cover must not be intimidated in America. That's not the America I know. That's not the America I value.

Attacks or intimidation efforts against Muslim Americans or Arab Americans, warned the president, would be aggressively prosecuted.

In addition to a firm insistence on tolerance for all citizens, including Muslims, the president expressed goodwill toward other countries—and toward Democratic leaders—in his opening remarks before the Joint Session, remarks that are striking in light of how little such sentiments would be present for the remainder of the Bush presidency:

Speaker Hastert, Minority Leader Gephardt, Majority Leader Daschle and Senator Lott, I thank you for your friendship, for your leadership and for your service to our country. *(Applause.)*

And on behalf of the American people, I thank the world for its outpouring of support. America will never forget the sounds of our National Anthem playing at Buckingham Palace, on the streets of Paris, and at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate.

Unquestionably, the 9/11 attacks would have united the country behind any president; external attacks on a nation virtually always prompt the citizenry's solidarity behind their leaders. But sustained support for President Bush was not merely the by-product of emotion-driven reactions to the attack. The president himself was responsible for a wide and deep admiration and trust on the part of many Americans who, though initially skeptical of him, were eager that their country be led by an empowered and able president.

Predictably, the president's approval ratings eroded from the unnatural 90 percent level, but, as noted, they remained high over the course of the next two years. And the March 2003 invasion of Iraq boosted the approval ratings once again to near 70 percent.

The president's approval ratings did not decline substantially until it became apparent that, contrary to the predominant justification given for the invasion of Iraq, that country did not possess any weapons of mass destruction and was not even actively pursuing development of such weapons at the time the United States invaded. Though the lack of WMDs in Iraq was apparent for some time to those closely following political events, it was the issuance of the "Duelfer Report" in October 2004 which solidified that fact as undisputed conventional wisdom among the country's media and pundit classes. That report, issued by the CIA under the supervision of its principal Iraqi weapons expert, Charles Duelfer, was intended by the Bush administration to constitute the official and definitive findings with respect to Saddam's weapons programs. And those findings could not have been more definitive—more incriminating.

Most Americans did not, of course, read that report, but its impact on America's political discourse and public opinion about Iraq is nonetheless difficult to overstate. It single-handedly put an end to any ambiguity among America's punditry, political elite, and other opinion-makers as to the complete nonexistence of the WMDs. In the wake of the "Duelfer Report," the nonexistence of WMDs in Iraq became such a widely accepted fact that even Bush-friendly media outlets such as Fox News reported it in clear and unambiguous terms. As one Fox report from October 2004 put it:

The chief U.S. arms inspector in Iraq has found no evidence of weapons of mass destruction production by Saddam Hussein's regime after 1991....

"It appears that he did not vigorously pursue those programs after the inspectors left," a U.S. official said on condition of anonymity, ahead of the report's Wednesday afternoon release by the CIA.

Such an incontrovertible finding was directly contrary to the most critical prewar claims that the president and his top officials had repeatedly represented not as being merely likely, but as *hard fact* beyond the realm of doubt. As the Fox report went on to note somewhat pointedly:

Vice President Dick Cheney said in an Aug. 26, 2002 speech, 6 1/2 months before the invasion, that "simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies and against us."

The "Duelfer Report" was issued one and a half years after the invasion of Iraq. By then, in light of the failure to find any WMDs (despite the administration's continuous assurances that they "knew" where they were located), it was readily apparent that there were none.

Nonetheless, up until the definitive conclusions were issued by an authoritative report, the president and his supporters were able to cloud the issue of WMDs with obfuscating assertions that no such weapons had been found "yet"—as though they existed but were hidden—or with murkier assertions that the United States *had* located something called "weapons of mass destruction related program activities." No Bush official, and certainly not the president himself, acknowledged (until after the

2004 election) that Saddam simply had no WMDs. The “Duelfer Report” and its uncompromising absolute language put an end to those evasions and compelled the widespread recognition of the truth.

An October 2004 article in the *Washington Post* provides a flavor of the type of statements about the administration’s prewar claims that became commonplace once the “Duelfer Report” was issued:

Duelfer’s report, delivered yesterday to two congressional committees, represents the government’s most definitive accounting of Hussein’s weapons programs, the assumed strength of which the Bush administration presented as a central reason for the war. While previous reports have drawn similar conclusions, Duelfer’s assessment went beyond them in depth, detail and level of certainty.

“We were almost all wrong” on Iraq, Duelfer told a Senate panel yesterday.

CNN led its coverage of the report’s findings by underscoring not only the complete absence of WMDs in Iraq for more than ten years, but the absence of any efforts whatsoever on Saddam’s part to develop such weapons:

Saddam Hussein did not possess stockpiles of illicit weapons at the time of the U.S. invasion in March 2003 and had not begun any program to produce them, a CIA report concludes.

In fact, the long-awaited report, authored by Charles Duelfer, who advises the director of central intelligence on Iraqi weapons, says Iraq’s WMD program was essentially destroyed in 1991 and Saddam ended Iraq’s nuclear program after the 1991 Gulf War.

In terms of assessing the Bush legacy, the definitive finding that Saddam had no WMDs whatsoever—issued by the president’s handpicked weapons experts—is certainly one of the most symbolical and significant events, and one of the most consequential.

While Americans differed (and continue to differ) on exactly what caused the vast discrepancy between the president’s prewar claims and the reality in Iraq—an honest mistake, a reckless disregard for whether the claims were true, pressure on the intelligence community to issue findings that justified an invasion, or outright, deliberate deceit—there was little dispute, once the report was issued, that the primary justification used to persuade Americans to support the president’s attack on Iraq was simply false. It dramatically altered the opinions of many Americans with regard to the president, and it helped catalyze what can only be described as a near-total collapse of the Bush presidency.

The U.S. had alienated most of the world by commencing an optional war “justified” by the urgent need to eliminate weapons that simply did not exist. At best, the revelation meant that the U.S. had committed a horrifying and embarrassing blunder in front of the entire world. And as the situation in Iraq became more chaotic and it was clear that the president had lost control of events in that country (if he ever had such control in the first place), the “blunder” became not merely embarrassing but dangerous, destructive, and increasingly difficult to defend.

The inescapable fact that WMDs did not exist had a more significant impact on the perceptions of Bush supporters than it did on Bush opponents, since the latter were predominantly already against the war and already harbored serious doubts about the president’s judgment and honesty. There were large

numbers of Independents, moderates, and even liberal Democrats who were not natural political allies of the president but who put aside those political differences and supported the invasion of Iraq. Many did so despite holding reservations about the wisdom of invading a sovereign country that had not attacked the United States, but ultimately deferred to the president's judgment and integrity by accepting his insistent claims that the invasion was critical to U.S. national security.

The realization by war supporters that the president's primary prewar justification was false, and that their good-faith support for him had been exploited to enable an agenda having nothing to do with terrorism, led to a sense of deep betrayal and irreversible mistrust. From that point forward, many reasonable people were unwilling to place faith in the accuracy of the president's statements.

Making matters worse for the president, the definitive finding that there were no WMDs came at the time when the occupation of Iraq—which Americans had been led to expect would be quick and easy—was plagued by chaos, violence, and increasingly high American casualties. That there was no end in sight was becoming rapidly apparent. And rather than making progress, Iraq began to resemble the lawless and violence-plagued state that—at the time of the Afghanistan invasion—Americans were told was the climate most likely to breed terrorism.

The revelation of no WMDs, coming as Iraq was falling apart, thus had the devastating effect of undermining Americans' faith in the integrity of the president *as well as* his administration's competence. Those two attributes—personal honesty and competence in foreign affairs—had been the pillars of the president's political strength, and both were subjected to severe assault by the “Duell Report” and the accompanying deterioration of Iraq. Polls thus demonstrated not only that previous pro-Bush Americans were expressing disapproval of his performance as president, but that the assessment of the president as a person—his honesty, reliability, and judgment—was dramatically worsening.

According to the Pew Research Center, in September 2003, 62 percent of Americans believed President Bush was *trustworthy*. By July 2005, that number had dropped to 49 percent, and by March 2006, the number had plummeted to 40 percent.

Similarly, when asked to describe President Bush using only one word, the leading response in February 2005 was *honest*, given by 38 percent of respondents. The word *incompetent* finished a distant fifth, garnering only 14 percent. But only a year later, in March 2006, those numbers reversed. *Incompetent* became the leading response with 29 percent, while *honest* tumbled to sixth place, with only 14 percent—tied with the word *liar* (14 percent) and behind the epithet *idiot* (17 percent). As Pew put it in a March 2006 report accompanying its polling data:

President Bush's declining image also is reflected in the single-word descriptions people use to describe their impression of the president. Three years ago, positive one-word descriptions of Bush far outnumbered negative ones. Over the past two years, the positive-negative balance has been roughly equal. But the one-word characterizations have turned decidedly negative since last July.

Currently, 48% use a negative word to describe Bush compared with just 28% who use a positive term, and 10% who use neutral language.

The 2007 Pew poll was even worse for the president. *Incompetent* continued to be the leading adjective, this time from 34 percent of the respondents. Second was *arrogant*, the adjective selected by 25 percent; the word *idiot* continued to attract a sizable portion as well (19 percent).

The Duelfer Report was issued in October 2004—less than one month prior to the 2004 election. As a result, the unraveling of the Bush presidency was still in its initial stage when America decided to re-elect him. Bush's approval rating, after remaining near or above 60 percent for most of 2002 and 2003, descended to the 50 percent level in 2004—generally considered the danger zone for the re-election prospects of incumbent presidents—and it hovered there throughout the year, up to and including the election.

Opinion polls in the weeks before the election reflected a dead heat between Bush and John Kerry. Ultimately, Bush won the 2004 race by a popular-vote margin of 2.7 percentage points, the smallest margin of victory for any incumbent president since 1828. As the *Los Angeles Times*' Ron Brownstein noted after the election: "Apart from Truman in 1948 (whose winning margin was 4–5 percentage points), every other president elected to a second term since 1832 has at least doubled the margin that Bush had over Kerry." And just as was true in 2000, Bush's 2004 victory was dependent upon a narrow victory in a single state, this time in Ohio.

Most remarkable about the narrowness of Bush's 2004 victory is the vast array of overwhelming electoral advantages he enjoyed as an incumbent War President. Those advantages ought to have made re-election nearly assured.

Incumbent American presidents rarely lose under any circumstances. But Americans have never voted a president out of office during wartime, having comfortably re-elected all four previous wartime presidents who ran again (Madison, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Nixon).

Beyond those towering inherent advantages, Bush barely squeaked by despite running against John Kerry, one of the most politically ungifted major party nominees in several decades; despite Kerry running an inept and passive presidential campaign, leading former DNC chair Terry McAuliffe calling the campaign's failure to attack Bush's record "one of the biggest acts of political malpractice in the history of American politics" and despite a significant financial advantage. Even with all of those formidable advantages, facing a weak opponent and an unskillful campaign, the War President, after four years of governing, won only two states in 2004 that he did not take in 2000 (Iowa and New Mexico) and even lost New Hampshire for a net gain of only one state.

Since his re-election, the president's popularity has continued to decline steadily—at times even precipitously—to the point where George Bush has reached historic levels of sustained unpopularity. To put the collapse of the president's popularity into context, at the time Richard Nixon was forced to resign the presidency after being battered for two years by the Watergate scandal, Nixon's approval rating had plummeted to 25 percent—a mere seven points lower than the 32 percent approval rating registered by President Bush multiple times throughout 2006. On January 21, 2007, when CBS News issued a poll placing the president's approval rating at 28 percent, the right-wing website Drudge Report posted a headline which read: "Bush poll ratings fall to Nixon levels."

On the eve of the president's 2007 State of the Union address, Bloomberg News reported that

“President George W. Bush’s approval ratings are now the lowest for any president the day before State of the Union speech since Richard Nixon in 1974.” And unlike previous presidents, most of whom reached all-time approval-rating lows in the mid-30s, George Bush’s unpopularity has been sustained, spending virtually all of 2006 and the early months of 2007 mired in the mid-to-low 30s. The only convincing comparison one can make is the collapse of the Lyndon Johnson presidency, which—like Bush’s collapse—was tied not to some fleeting event or scandal, but to a deeply unpopular war that dragged on without end.

Even as early as the end of 2005, Gary Langer of ABC News noted the historic nature of George W. Bush’s unpopularity and drew the comparison this way:

An increasingly unpopular war, an ethics cloud, and broad economic discontent have pushed public opinion of the Bush administration from bad to worse, infecting not only the president’s ratings on political issues but his personal credentials for honesty and leadership as well....

A striking feature of the president’s predicament is the intensity of sentiment against him. Just 20 percent of Americans “strongly” approve of his work in office, the fewest of his career; more than twice as many, 47 percent, strongly disapprove, the most yet seen....

Bush’s troubles stand out, in large part because they’re rooted not just in economic concerns but in an increasingly unpopular war. That invites comparisons to Lyndon B. Johnson, whose approval rating suffered each year as the country became more enmeshed in Vietnam—dropping in Gallup data from 75 percent on average in 1964, to 43 percent in 1967 and 1968. Bush, for his part, has gone from an average of 73 percent approval in 2000 and 2001 to 46 percent, on average, so far this year. The trend lines are strikingly similar.

This dramatic, wholesale erosion of support for the president continued after Langer drew the LBJ comparison and it has now been sustained over a much longer period of time. It spans the ideological and demographic spectrum and appears largely irreversible. Analyzing a February 2006 poll showing the president with new lows in approval and popularity ratings, political scientist Richard Stoll of Rice University observed that it “suggests that he’s pretty much down to his core supporters out there...and *everyone else has left*” (emphasis added).

Though catalyzed by the catastrophe in Iraq, this collapse had plenty of other authors. From the outset, the president’s second term was plagued by a series of embarrassing domestic failures that, in an accompaniment to the unraveling of Iraq, exacerbated perceptions of Bush’s startling ineptitude. The president’s campaign to overhaul Social Security—his flamboyantly touted second-term “legacy program”—flopped from the start, his proposals pushed away even by his own party, which made him appear weak and ineffective. The failed Supreme Court nomination of his loyal aide Harriet Miers was fueled almost entirely by his own supporters and further eroded the powerful, almost omnipotent aura that had surrounded him during the heyday of his first term. The palpable sloth and indifference that characterized his reaction to the Katrina disaster chipped away further at his image of strength and Americans’ confidence in his ability to “protect” them. The fiasco over his attempt to turn over America’s port operations to a company owned by the United Arab Emirates even raised questions about whether he was sufficiently committed to protecting the country against the threat of Islamic terrorism, the only asset which had, until that point, been immune from attack. As the president’s second term slogged along, his few remaining strengths were gradually diluted until they disappeared.

completely.

But it was the disaster in Iraq that provided the essential framework in which all of these other failures unfolded. There is certainly a good argument to make that the nonexistence of WMDs was harmful to the president *only* because the war that those weapons “justified” had been managed ineptly, to the point where America actually appeared to be losing. Many Americans, perhaps most, hate a losing war more than they hate an unjust war. To be burdened with an image of weakness and defeat is arguably more damaging for an American president than to be revealed as dishonest. The substantial bulk of the Iraq-fueled hostility toward the president had as much to do with the fact that he failed to win the war—that he seemed to be *losing*—as it did with the fact that he justified the war in the first place with pretexts that were revealed to be false. But in all events, the confirmation of the nonexistence of WMDs did not mean merely that the war was sold on false pretenses. The revelation itself was a failure, a defeat. It brought embarrassment to the United States and vindication to its opponents. And even many Americans who were not bothered by the invasion were deeply disturbed by the humiliation when America appeared in the eyes of the world as incapable of doing anything right in its attempt to subdue Iraq.

By early 2006, the vast majority of Americans irreversibly opposed the war in Iraq—the centerpiece of the Bush presidency—and believed that it had been a mistake to invade. Worse, Americans largely believed that they were misled into supporting the invasion of Iraq not by virtue of erroneous intelligence but due to *deliberate deceit*. The *Washington Post* reported at the end of 2005: “A clear majority—55 percent—now says the administration deliberately misled the country in making its case for war with Iraq—a conflict that an even larger majority say is not worth the cost.”

This staggering unpopularity is all the more striking considering its contrast with the political omnipotence the president enjoyed for the first two and a half years after the 9/11 attacks. On one level, this near-complete reversal is difficult to understand because the president has not changed his approach or his worldview in the slightest. But on another, the collapse of his support is due precisely to the fact that the president’s governing approach and mind-set never change, even when his policies are glaring failures and the issues he is forced to address are entirely unsuitable to his worldview.

It is difficult to overstate the extent to which the Bush presidency imploded, but the November 2006 midterm elections provide a potent illustration. The Republican Party’s smashing electoral defeat in the 2006 midterms was as rare and as mammoth as was that party’s midterm victory in 2002. For only the third time in sixty years, there was a change in control of the Congress, as Democrats took over both the House and the Senate.

The magnitude of the Republican losses was staggering. The Democrats defeated six Republican senators to take control of the Senate, and picked up a total of thirty-one House seats. Sixteen governorships switched from Republican control to Democratic, returning majority control of the governorships back to the Democrats, by a margin of 28 to 22.

More notably still, not one incumbent House Democrat lost, and therefore not one single Republican challenger won—the first time since 1938 that one of the two major parties failed to defeat a single House incumbent. All incumbent Senate Democrats also won. Thus, the 2006 midterm election was only the second election in U.S. history in which one of the major parties failed to defeat

even a single incumbent from the other party.

Dissatisfaction with the president's Republican Party was so pervasive that it extended down to multiple state races. All incumbent Democratic governors won re-election as well. Democrats seized control of four different state legislatures previously under Republican control, while Republicans failed to take over any Democratic-run state legislatures. The 2006 rejection by American voters of George Bush's Republican Party was total and evident across-the-board in every region outside of the Deep South.

With that humiliating development, the collapse of the Bush presidency was virtually complete. By the end of 2006, vast majorities of Americans believed that the president was untrustworthy, incompetent, and even unlikable. They believed he misled them into supporting the invasion of Iraq not by virtue of erroneous intelligence but through deliberate deceit. Americans' dislike for George Bush was so widespread and intense that it infected the entire Republican Party.

THE ESTABLISHMENT REBELS

After the American electorate signaled its profound dissatisfaction with the Bush presidency, and as events in Iraq continued their downward spiral, even the Washington Establishment, including its Republican standard-bearers, abandoned the president. It is as though the country collectively acknowledged the severity of America's crisis the administration had inflicted and resolved to take action, leaving the president standing alone—weak, isolated, and unpopular—as his war lay in ruins. By the time the president unveiled his so-called Iraq “surge” strategy at the beginning of 2007, the war in Iraq was spoken of not as a mere mistake or serious problem, but as a strategic disaster of historic proportions.

Republican senator Chuck Hagel, at a Senate Committee on Foreign Relations hearing where Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was testifying, called the escalation “morally wrong” and declared: “I have to say, Madam Secretary, that I think this speech given last night by this president represents the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam.” The day after President Bush announced his “surge” strategy, Al Gore declared it “the worst strategic mistake in the entire history of the United States.”

Such rhetoric suddenly began issuing from even moderate, establishment-defending journalists and pundits whose principal function typically is to recite Beltway conventional wisdom and the political orthodoxies prevailing among the Beltway elite. The *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, a vigorous champion of moderation in all things—policy, politics, and rhetoric—wrote that the president's January 2007 “surge” speech revealed “a presidency in eclipse: He has lost the House and Senate; he has lost the public on the war; and he has attached his presidency to a riderless horse.” Similarly, CBS News' Dick Meyer observed:

Rarely in our history has a president made a speech like this—an announcement that a large number of American soldiers will be sent to a foreign war—with less public, political, and

international support. The president really is alone.

~~In war and politics, an essential measure of power is allies. Bush has few, and they are not powerful.~~

By 2007, unrestrained attacks on the president and his policies had become commonplace and were but a symptom of the wholesale insurrection by the Washington Establishment against the presidency that it had propped up for so long. The most surprising indignity suffered by the Bush presidency—and perhaps the most harmful as well—was the unabashed critical conclusion issued by the blue-chip bipartisan panel, the so-called Iraq Study Group, or Baker-Hamilton Commission, which was composed of some of Washington's most institutionally respected figures. Commissions of this sort are typically assembled in response to problems with the expectation that they will recommend, most, incremental changes on the margins.

But the sheer scope of Bush's Iraq failure, and the grave danger posed to the United States by its continuation (let alone escalation), did not permit the commission the luxury of such tempered and polite findings. Instead, the report was emphatic, at times even scathing, in its assessment that the war had gone terribly awry.

The day the report was issued, the commission's co-chair, Lee Hamilton, summarized its conclusion: "The situation in Iraq today is grave and deteriorating" the report itself warned: "If the situation continues to deteriorate, the consequences could be severe." The report never referenced the possibility of "victory," instead aiming for efforts to stabilize the country in order for all American troops not necessary for force protection to be out of Iraq by early 2008.

The report even accused the administration of "significant underreporting of the violence in Iraq." It then proceeded to echo a charge made over the course of several years by war opponents—namely, that the administration was concealing negative information about Iraq from the American public in order to maintain support for the war. The report pointedly noted: "Good policy is difficult to make when information is systematically collected in a way that minimizes its discrepancy with policy goals."

The bipartisan commission, composed of five Republicans and five Democrats, was the very embodiment of The Respected Washington Establishment. It was chaired by longtime Bush family supporter James Baker, who served as secretary of state for Bush's father and who led the charge on behalf of Bush's successful battle over the 2000 Florida election results, a success resulting in Bush becoming president. Another of the commission's Republican members, Sandra Day O'Connor, was one of the five justices whose vote halted Al Gore's requested recount, ensuring George Bush's inauguration.

The report rejected not merely the president's handling of the war but also, more critically, the overall approach of the Bush administration toward the Middle East. The report's key recommendations constituted wholesale rejections of the basic premises of the Bush approach to the Middle East—specifically, it concluded that the United States should open negotiations with the regimes in Iran and Syria to achieve stability in Iraq, and should also exert far more efforts toward facilitating an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

These recommendations, unanimously embraced by the commission, were clear repudiations of the pillars of the Bush foreign policy. The president's approach to the Middle East was informed by his view that "Evil" regimes (his characterization of those that rule Iran and Syria) cannot be reasoned with or negotiated with. The president has been equally insistent that the U.S. should remain firmly on Israel's side rather than acting as an "honest broker" between it and its "Evil terrorist" enemies.

That such a panel—composed of wise, respected Washington elites, including some Bush supporters—would issue such a resounding rejection of the president's handling of the war and his overall foreign policy constituted nothing short of the political establishment's full-scale rebellion. Over the course of the report the president had chosen for the United States. Writing in *Salon*, Gary Kamiya described the report as "a call for the United States to radically change its policies in the Middle East," and explained:

Under normal circumstances, the chances would be nil that a bipartisan panel made up of such wild radicals as Sandra Day O'Connor, Vernon Jordan and Alan Simpson would bluntly assert that "the United States will not be able to achieve its goals in the Middle East unless the United States deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict," or insist that we begin talking with states we deem supporters of terrorism. Holding Israel's feet to the fire, which is what "dealing directly" with the conflict means, is politically radioactive in Washington—or it was.

But Bush's Iraq debacle has exacerbated the contradictions and weaknesses of our Mideast policy and raised the stakes for the United States so high that it has become impossible for neutral observers to simply mouth the party line. Just as the thought of the gallows concentrates the mind, so a war that has cost almost 3,000 American lives and \$2 billion a week, weakened America's standing in the world, and strengthened our terrorist enemies, has forced the Washington power elite to acknowledge reality.

Bush's almost immediate rejection of the report's key findings, and his announced intention to escalate the war instead, was a potent sign of how isolated he had become.

The Iraq War had become so manifest a failure by the end of 2006 that some prominent war supporters and prowar pundits were not merely changing their minds about the war, but were affirmatively denying that they ever supported it in the first place. In January 2007, Joe Klein, the longtime columnist for *Time* magazine, claimed on a *Time* website: "I've been opposed to the Iraq war ever since...2002." But on February 23, 2003—exactly one month before the invasion of Iraq—Klein had been a guest on *Meet the Press* and had this exchange with Tim Russert:

KLEIN: This is a really tough decision. War may well be the right decision at this point. In fact, I think it—it's—it—it probably is.

RUSSERT: Now that's twice you've said that: "It's the right war." You believe it's the wrong time

Why do you think it's the right war?

KLEIN: Because sooner or later, this guy has to be taken out. Saddam has—Saddam Hussein has to be taken out.

For a public figure like Klein to claim that he was opposed to the Iraq War—even though he was on national television one month before it started to pronounce that war “probably” is “the right decision at this point”—demonstrates just how damaging Klein perceives being associated with the president’s decision to invade.

Like Klein, Michael Ledeen—a contributing editor of *National Review* and a Freedom Scholar at the influential neoconservative think tank American Enterprise Institute—wrote on the *National Review* blog in November 2006: “I had and have no involvement with our Iraq policy. I opposed the military invasion of Iraq before it took place.”

Ledeen, however, wrote in August 2002 of “the desperately-needed and long overdue war against Saddam Hussein” and when he was interviewed for *Front Page Magazine* the same month and asked “Okay, well if we are all so certain about the dire need to invade Iraq, then when do we do so?” Ledeen replied: “Yesterday.” There is obvious, substantial risk in falsely claiming that one opposed the Iraq War notwithstanding a public record of support. But that war has come to be viewed as such a profound failure that that risk, at least in the eyes of some, is outweighed by the prospect of being associated with Bush’s invasion.

Perhaps most notably, even the aggressively loyal band of Bush supporters who have long stood behind the president on virtually every issue—who cheered on and enabled almost every decision—has been abandoning him as the perception grows that he is a weak and failed president.

For the first several years of the Bush presidency—up to and including his re-election—Peggy Noonan, the former speechwriter to the president’s father who wrote Bush 41’s “thousand points of light” speech, employed her trademark effusiveness in her *Wall Street Journal* column and frequent television appearances in praise of the president’s character and integrity.

Yet by 2006, she began attacking him regularly—his performance in office as well as his character. Noonan focused specifically on what had previously been, in the eyes of his supporters, a great strength—namely his refusal to consider the possibility that he had erred and his belief that failure requires nothing more than increased determination to succeed. Noonan wrote in an October 2006 column:

I think that Americans have pretty much stopped listening to him. One reason is that you don’t have to listen to get a sense of what’s going on. He does not appear to rethink things based on new data. You don’t have to tune in to see how he’s shifting emphasis to address a trend, or tacking to accommodate new winds. For him there is no new data, only determination.

But whereas certain fans began abandoning Bush on the ground that he is too stubborn and resista

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