

Fertilizing Bush: Growing a Great Leader for Difficult Times

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George W. Bush's triumphant landing on the carrier Abraham Lincoln was an audacious spectacle meant to permanently clothe him in red, white, and blue. In subsequent months, as the Iraq war worsened and the economy stalled, Bush seemed to lose much of his star-spangled aura. Even the timorous American news media began to criticize his policies. Yet for many Americans, Bush remains a great leader, a larger-than-life hero (thus one can purchase, for \$39.95, the "Elite Force Aviator: George W. Bush, U.S. President and Naval Aviator, 12" Action Figure," featuring a fully detailed cloth flight suit, helmet with oxygen mask, survival vest, g-pants, parachute harness and much more"). September 11 so transformed Bush's image that more than two years passed before his approval ratings dropped to their pre-9-11 level. Out of the ashes of the World Trade Center grew a Bush of heroic proportions, a super-sized figure promoted by the news media's strikingly homogenous and ideologically useful narrative of transformation.¹

For a new Bush to bloom, reporters and pundits first pointed to the earlier, flawed model. *US News & World Report* asserted that to many he was merely "an affable Texan backslapping his way through a benign era or an untested, fortunate son of a former president." *The Boston Globe* cited *Saturday Night Live's* parody of Bush as "an overgrown boy, eager to please but befuddled as he burrowed about in his brain for a single cogent thought." Even *People* magazine (discussing the year's 25 most intriguing people) said that prior to 9-11 Bush seemed "poised to become his own Dan Quayle, a White House puppy frisking among the grown-ups."²

Next, reporters and pundits asserted that a fundamental change had occurred. As *Fortune* declared, "Almost everyone agrees that George W. Bush is a different President than he was two months ago." But assertions such as this were insufficient; to make Bush's transformation more convincing, tangible proof was needed. And so this change was described as if it were an observable phenomenon: *Newsweek* wrote, "[Bush is] exceeding expectations, learning on the run before our eyes," *Newsday* told us that "We are watching Bush grow into his job," and *Time*

reported, “The President is growing before our eyes--not morphing into some completely new kind of leader but evolving in fits and starts and in real time. . . . The change in the man and his policies is too stark to deny.” To perceive Bush's transformation, about which almost everyone agreed, one had merely to open one's eyes. Conversely, to dispute this stark change was to deny the evidence of one's senses.³

Confirmation of Bush's transformation was found in his physical appearance. *USA Today* noted that “the furrows in his forehead seem deeper now, and some aides say they think his hair is grayer,” while the *New York Times* quoted former South Dakota governor William J. Janklow: “Look at his hair. Look at the lines on his face. It s incredible, the toll.” Although both the *Times* and *USA Today* qualified their arguments--Bush *seemed* to be graying *according to acquaintances*--this perception soon became fact. Thus MSNBC news anchor Brian Williams declared, “In person, [Bush] has indisputably aged in the job.” And *Newsweek* detailed these indisputable facts: “His Brillo-like hair is graying; there are new, vertical lines on his face that didn't exist a year ago.” This preoccupation with Bush's appearance, besides giving concrete evidence of his transformation, emphasized his newfound maturity. The formula here was simple (and not Grecian): gray hair equals grown up. The graying of Bush was an implicit refutation of his immaturity, a connection the *Times* made clear: “Bush seem[s] grayer, graver and more comfortable in the role” of leader.⁴

In building Bush s greatness, the press consistently sought to erase his weaknesses. The widely accepted view that he was lazy and disengaged was rebutted by emphasis on Bush s focus. The *Christian Science Monitor* declared Bush “focused in a manner that he wasn't before”; to the *Los Angeles Times*, Bush devoted himself to the crisis with “single-minded focus”; *Time* s Michael Duffy, on *Washington Week in Review*, described Bush as “uncluttered in his vision [and] . . . totally focused on this job”; and NBC correspondent David Gregory alleged that Bush “finally found a crisis to focus the sort of discipline that he brought . . . to the campaign. . . . He s got a kind of singular focus now. . . . He just seems so focused . . . because the administration . . . is focused in one area.” Although meant to signal his command and energy, this emphasis on Bush's focus suggests his utter disengagement prior to 9-11 and his consequent vulnerability to smart and aggressive ideologues, such as the neoconservative hawks whose imperial program soon became Bush's own focus.⁵

Another way to demonstrate Bush's fitness for command was to stress his physical fitness. Repeatedly, reporters took note of Bush's robust health. As *Fortune* explained, “[Bush] exercises daily after falling out of the habit and eats healthier food, knowing he must keep up his energy.” *Time* said, Bush is sticking to his exercise regimen, watching his diet and making sure that he gets a decent night's sleep.” (A year and a half later, *USA Today* would continue this theme, noting that Bush “gave up sweets just before the [Iraq] war began.”) The logic here is clear and quintessentially American: physical fitness equals intellectual and moral fitness. Thus *U.S. News & World Report* asserted that “Bush's personal regimen suggests a new seriousness.” *Newsweek* argued that “another source of [his] strength is physical conditioning. For Bush it's a concern bordering on obsession, and it s paid off in self-confidence.” And the *New York Times* quoted Mark McKinnon, Bush's former media consultant: “The fact that he's running a seven-minute mile now attests to the discipline he s bringing to his whole life. . . . He has more snap, more energy, more focus.” Of course, physical exercise does not necessarily lead to mental acuity. Bush's physical conditioning was emphasized because it was an easy way to mark his transformation and signal his dedication. A more relevant demonstration of focus might have suggested that Bush was reading detailed policy papers and working through the night to familiarize himself with the intricacies of Middle-Eastern politics. But even in the blur of post 9-11 propaganda, such an assertion would have seemed preposterous.⁶

To further enhance his image, the media associated Bush with other great leaders. The *Washington Post* spoke of him as “Trumanesque”; *Fortune* explained, “the last President to

change so dramatically was Harry Truman” but conceded that “Bush's archetype now isn't Truman. . . . It's Ronald Reagan.” CBS's *Sunday Morning* compared him to Truman and FDR. *U.S. News & World Report* suggested that “Bush's latest hero is not drawn from the traditional list of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or Franklin Roosevelt. Instead, Bush has become more enthralled than ever with Winston Churchill.” Likewise, *Newsweek* noted that when Bush visited London he spent 30 minutes “sitting in Churchill's chair and admiring the charts and maps.”⁷

The latter is a good example of the Bush administration's dexterous sleight-of-hand. The Churchill comparison sprang from White House Chief of Staff Andy Card's telling reporters of Bush's fascination with Churchill, of his hope to emulate “Churchill's resolve, his humor . . . his ability to lift a people during a very challenging time.” Pointing to a bust of Churchill and a portrait of Lincoln in the Oval Office and announcing them things Bush held especially dear, Card explained, “It was kind of spontaneous on the president's part to pick out those things.” Bush could not be directly compared to Churchill, but the administration could imply a resemblance in hopes that the media would connect the dots, which they happily did. For instance, *Time* wrote, “At first glance, it's hard to imagine two men less alike. . . . But one big thing Bush and Churchill may share. . . . Churchill never knew self-doubt. It seems to rarely stalk Bush.” The administration's strategy was to mention Bush and Churchill in the same sentence. Soon proximity became correspondence and Bush became Churchill (just as Saddam became Osama).⁸

If Bush resembled Churchill, a comparison to Lincoln couldn't be far behind. The *Washington Post*'s David Broder devoted an entire column to this comparison: “Like Lincoln, Bush has tried to make it clear we are not warring on other peoples”; Bush has shown the steely determination” of Lincoln, and “in so many ways, a common thread joins Lincoln, Kennedy, and Bush.” The Lincoln analogy was helped when Bush was seen carrying the book *April 1865: The Month That Saved America*. The strategy here was to juxtapose Lincoln and Bush and let the press do the rest. Rather than dismissing this intellectual product placement (as every teacher knows, carrying a book is not the same as reading it--especially for an uncurious “C” student like Bush), NBC gleefully followed the administration's lead: *April 1865*'s author, Jay Winik, appeared on the *Sunday Today Show*, where he declared, “I really think there are certain echoes of Lincoln in [Bush].”⁹

The Bush administration knows most Americans get only an impressionistic view of the news, while channel surfing, taking care of their children, or otherwise struggling to balance increasing work hours, declining income, and a fraying family life. The administration presents its message accordingly, having Bush appear before a banner that repeats, in Orwellian fashion, the message of the day--“Clear Skies,” “Corporate Responsibility,” etc. To support the Iraq War, the administration skillfully shaped public perceptions: more than half the country thought the 9-11 hijackers were Iraqis and Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the 9-11 attacks. (Another twenty percent believed chemical and biological weapons were used against U.S. troops.)¹⁰

To build a new Bush, the administration and the media had also to address Bush's intellectual shortcomings. So they identified other books Bush had read, including James Reston's *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*. According to Karl Rove, “Bush was sort of dismissive in the beginning of the Saladin book. But then he got into it and told me he enjoyed it.” (Reston did not publicly respond to the use of his name and work in support of the heroizing of Bush until September 2003, when he criticized Bush for “embrac[ing] history only when he's trying to avoid the scrutiny of today. He ignored it when it could have helped him the most: before he gave the order for a massive deployment of troops to the Middle East.”) And Bush was alleged to have read *Theodore Rex*, Edmund Morris's biography of Teddy Roosevelt. Bush told reporters, I've just finished my book. *Theodore Rex* by Earl Morris. . . . I'd recommend people reading it.” Bush's phrasing, having finished “my book,” suggests a juvenile pride in accomplishment: he's completed his assignment, he's read one book. Although the American news media uncritically repeated these assertions, the British press was far less credulous. The *Times* of

London noted that “although he has degrees from Harvard and Yale, Mr. Bush has never been known as a big reader.” Questioned after a presidential debate about a biography of Dean Acheson he said he was reading, the *Times* recalled, “Bush gave a good impression of somebody who had not actually read the book.” Likewise, while acknowledging that recently “[Bush] is said to have devoured quite a few” books, the *London Daily Telegraph* pointed out that in his ghost-written autobiography, “Mr. Bush mentions reading only one book, the Bible.” The *London Times* identified the cause of Bush’s newfound interest in history: “Bush’s history tuition has come mostly from Karl Rove. . . . [who drew] up Mr. Bush’s reading programme.” The American press did not wonder that a Yale University history major was being schooled by college dropout Rove, nor did they suggest what they surely knew, that this reading program was merely spin meant to give Bush the appearance of introspection, of learning from history.¹¹

Bush was presented just as Rove intended, hungry for history and turning to the past for wisdom. Various historians, including Joseph Ellis, Stephen Ambrose, and Edmund Morris, were brought into the White House to help Bush and his staff, in Rove’s words, “step back and take the bigger picture.” After his meeting, Morris described Bush as “a tremendously nice man, a deeply religious man. . . . It was obvious from the moment he began talking that religion is an important part of his makeup. . . . [But Bush] didn’t seem to me to be the sort of man who read much. . . . I had no feeling that he did have a deep understanding of other cultures. . . .the most noticeable quality of [Bush’s] conversation . . . was the urgency with which he had to make me understand that he was a devout Christian.” Morris’s observations, which contradicted the idea of Bush as reader and historian, which conveyed an impression of Bush as simple-minded Christian and which went against the tide of Bush revisionism, was almost completely unreported (I found only one mention of Morris’s remarks in the Lexis-Nexis database--in Al Kamen’s beltway gossip column in the *Washington Post*).¹²

In bringing historians to the White House, his advisors sought both to place Bush in the pantheon of greatness and to show him learning from the past. But as he was stepping back and taking the bigger picture, Bush was also passing an executive order restricting access to presidential papers. The Bush who wanted to learn about presidential history was closing the historical record, was shrinking the big picture, and was being sued for doing so by the American Historical Association, the National Security Archive, the Organization of American Historians, Public Citizen, and the Reporters’ Committee for Freedom of the Press. Such has been the modus operandi of the Bush administration--to show a warm and fuzzy public face while stealthily implementing its reactionary policies, a pattern of deceit the news media has consistently downplayed, if not ignored, especially after 9-11.¹³

Then there was Bush’s most notable public failing: his misadventures with English. Bush’s speech post 9-11, of course, continued to be riddled with grammar errors and syntactical confusion. Yet the news media asserted that Bush’s speech, like Bush the man, was transformed. “His public remarks,” *Fortune* explained, “formerly rare and often fractured, are more frequent and self-assured”; *Newsweek* declared Bush “eloquent in public”; *US News and World Report* described him as “speaking with uncharacteristic eloquence and self-reflection”; the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote that “Bush has spoken . . . sometimes even eloquently.” Reporters did not identify specific instances of this eloquence. Perhaps it was Bush’s assertion that “This is a struggle that’s going to take a while.... It’s not one of these Kodak moments. There is no moment to this. This is a long struggle and a different kind of war.” Or his assertion that “the idea of a mom and dad prioritizing family is all about not only enhancing the quality of life of their children but collectively making America so much stronger and so much better after the evils. This country is a fabulous country. They thought they hurt us, the evil ones. They have made us stronger, more real and a better land.” To refashion Bushspeak as eloquent, reporters downplayed such linguistic difficulties. “If he occasionally made side trips through syntax,” explained *Time*, “he also showed a level of introspection and analysis that surprised even his aides.” Similarly, *Newsweek* explained that in their interview with him “there were few mangled sentences.” In an

unintentionally comic aside, *Newsweek* noted that “the handlers at the table were listening, not handling.” What passed for eloquence in the post 9-11 media world was a President whose speech was less-fractured, with fewer mangled sentences, and only occasional syntactical problems--a President who could speak without being corrected by handlers¹⁴.

When they were noted, his misstatements were quickly dismissed. Early on, for instance, Bush referred to a “crusade” against Al Qaeda, which the media depicted as an unfortunate misstep on the road to eloquence. He referred to Pakistanis by the racist term “Pakis,” which the media largely ignored. More than downplaying and ignoring Bush’s gaffes, the press saw these as a virtue, as evidence of his plainspokenness. In a speech at the CIA, according to *Time*, “Bush said three times that the terrorists had ‘misunderestimated America and its leader. He was right.’” *Time* went on to explain that “Bush is what the nation needs in a Commander in Chief--simple in his speech, clear in his vision, confident in his ultimate success.” “Even his off-the-cuff remarks,” *Fortune* explained, have had a genuineness that somehow works,” while for the *Los Angeles Times*, “Bush has shown an almost Trumanesque capacity to express what ordinary Americans are thinking.” In praising his plainspoken Americanness, the news media, I assume, was referring to such declarations as

“I want justice. There’s an old poster out west, as I recall, that said, ‘Wanted: Dead or Alive’”;

“I’m not going to fire a \$2 million missile at a \$10 empty tent and hit a camel in the butt. It’s going to be decisive”;

“in Western terms, to smoke them out of their caves, to get them running so we can get them.”

In this macho posturing, Margaret Carlson in *Time* heard “a singular expressiveness the rest of us lack: Bush’s gift of pre-verbal authenticity comes at a time when the most articulate among us have been rendered speechless.” Like some rough-hewn primitive, Bush spoke from a well of natural honesty, unencumbered by the burden of verbal sophistication.¹⁵

Some might have objected to Bush’s cowboy Manicheism, his repeated reference to a war against evil, declaring, for instance, that “we are fighting evil, and we will continue to fight evil, and we will not stop until we defeat evil,” and that “the people who did this act on America and who may be planning further acts are evil people. . . . They’re flat evil. All they can think about is evil. And as a nation of good folks, we’re going to hunt them down.” Bush even managed to tie this struggle against evil to his tax plan: “We need to counter the shock wave of the evildoer by having individual rate cuts accelerated and by thinking about tax rebates.” Reporters couldn’t help noting Bush’s Manicheism--Roger Simon in *US News and World Report* explaining that “To Bush, the case is . . . simple--a cosmic battle of good vs. evil” and Gloria Borger, also in *US News and World Report*, writing, “If it all sounds biblical, that is because it is, pointedly so”--yet they barely noted the inappropriateness of describing a war against religious fundamentalists in the language of religious fundamentalism. This language, though, was not lost on the religious right. As the evangelical political activist Gary Bauer explained, “in the world of the Christian right . . . the nature of this war is such that it’s heightened the sense that a man of God is in the White House.” And an unidentified Bush adviser told *US News and World Report* that “Bush believes things happen for a purpose. . . . He has a sense that this is what his purpose is.” Some might be disturbed by this medieval world view, by born-again Bush’s sense that he is doing God’s bidding, but reporters ignored such concerns, concluding instead that Bush possessed a vital moral clarity.¹⁶

Indeed, Bush was portrayed as a Jimmy Stewart-like average American. As *Time* announced: “Bush can still remind you of the regular guy he used to be.” Despite his Andover prep school education, his Harvard and Yale degrees, his Old Money roots, and his personal fortune of \$11 million, Bush was everyman: *Time* urged Bush’s handlers to “Snatch the President from his spinners, kill the TelePrompTer, unleash the Everyman within.” A man whose adult success

depended on the largess of millionaires eager to capitalize on the Bush political empire and whose policies consistently attacked the working and middle classes was just a regular Joe. Hence his growth was our growth. As *The Christian Science Monitor* explained, "Bush's triumph was not so much in inspiring Americans toward effective action, but in reflecting the growth of Americans . . . toward their own inspiration." The *New York Times* likewise tied Bush's growth to America's, saying, "the United States has changed . . . perhaps far more than its leader." We are Bush and he is us.¹⁷

Why did the media so willingly advance this heroic view? An explanation could sometimes be found within news accounts. For instance, Elisabeth Bumiller in the *Times* wrote, "when the White House was spared, Americans seemed to turn even more toward it and the president as symbols of hope and calm and security. The man had merged with the office." The press's motivation, its need to rebuild Bush, stemmed from patriotic responsibility and civic duty. To support the war and build national confidence in a time of crisis, reporters and pundits had to provide the public with easy and unambiguous symbols of national purpose. Their duty was to build a president the public would follow and admire, a leader who would quell our fears and reinforce our confidence, a president who was "a symbol of hope and calm and security." As *Newsweek* explained, "We all need to know when it's safe to . . . come up from the basement. Presidents aren't just leaders, they're emblems, never more so than in wartime."¹⁸

One can see this emblem-building and hear these attempts to calm a troubled nation in a *New York Times* op-ed that appeared one month after the terror attacks: "The George W. Bush who addressed the nation . . . appeared to be a different man. . . . He seemed more confident, determined and sure of his purpose and was in full command of the complex array of political and military challenges that he faces." "In all," the *Times* concluded, "it was an assured appearance that should give citizens a sense that their president has done much to master the complexities of this new global crisis. . . . he seemed to be a leader whom the nation could follow in these difficult times." These conclusions are little more than propaganda, the nation's leading newspaper trying to dispel doubts about Bush's abilities. The propagandistic nature of this rhetoric may be more clearly understood if one imagines these as the words of a state enemy, such as China under Mao: "it was an assured appearance that should give citizens a sense that the Chairman has done much to master the complexities of this new global crisis. He seemed to be a leader whom the people could follow in these difficult times." In one month, Bush had been transformed into a confident, commanding, and assured leader demonstrating mastery of global complexities. More than quelling people's fears, the *New York Times*, standard-bearer and agenda-setter for the mainstream media, was sending a message to other news outlets: present establishment spin, write propaganda, grow a great leader for these difficult times.¹⁹

The question remains, though: why did the media refashion Bush in this way?

One, they viewed it as their institutional responsibility--their job was to soothe a frightened populace.

Two, commercial pressures, particularly on small media outlets, ensured that they follow the popular view, as evidenced, during the Afghanistan War, by a memo from the chief copy editor of the Panama City (FL) *News Herald*:

DO NOT USE photos on Page 1A showing civilian casualties from the U.S. war on Afghanistan. Our sister paper in Fort Walton Beach has done so and received hundreds and hundreds of threatening e-mails and the like. . . . DO NOT USE wire stories that lead with civilian casualties from the U.S. War on Afghanistan. They should be mentioned further down in the story. If the story needs rewriting to play down the civilian casualties, DO IT. The only exception is if the U.S. hits an orphanage, school, or similar facility and kills scores or hundreds of children.

While a memo like this is rare, it reflects a perception common in newsrooms after the 9-11 attacks: in a culture drunk with nationalist sentiment and wartime Manicheism, news organizations, ever wary of the bottom line, had to be particularly careful about presenting news that appeared too friendly to the enemy and too critical of the U.S. and its leader. Greg Mitchell of *Editor and Publisher*, discussing complaints received by newspapers about photos of dead Iraqi soldiers, noted that “even showing the casualties on the other side is an anti-war statement.” Large media enterprises did not escape these commercial pressures. Under normal circumstances, conglomerate-owned newspapers and TV networks, like any corporate subsidiary, are under tremendous pressure to increase shareholder value. In a time of heightened awareness and government propaganda, media organizations become even more responsive to public sentiment. Before and during the Iraq War, they were especially sensitive about upsetting a Republican-controlled Congress as it was considering changes in FCC ownership regulations, changes that would be worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Commercial pressures, then, consistently encouraged a sympathetic view of the war and a heroic view of George W.[20](#)

Three, these heroic narratives were pushed by a partisan, right-wing media who vigorously attacked counter-narratives--and any position that could be labeled anti-American. CNN's Christiane Amanpour lamented her network's capitulation to such attacks: “the press self-muzzled. . . my station was intimidated by the administration and its foot soldiers at Fox News. And it did, in fact, put a climate of fear and self-censorship . . . in terms of the kind of broadcast work we did” (to which Fox News spokeswoman Irena Briganti offered a fair and balanced reply: “Given the choice, it's better to be viewed as a foot soldier for Bush than a spokeswoman for al-Qaeda”).[21](#)

Four, no reliable official source offered a counter-narrative. This reliance upon official sources was most apparent in coverage of the Iraq War. Thus the *Los Angeles Times*'s Doyle McManus explained his paper's one-sided coverage of the pre-war debate by claiming, “we're not in the habit of ginning up debate that's not out there. The debate has been slow to come about--in many ways because the Democratic Party, or at least the Congressional Democratic Party, decided not to hold a debate on this” For McManus--and for the mainstream press generally--if Congressional Democrats were not objecting to the war, debate simply wasn't out there. Similarly, if Democrats were not opposing Bush and pointing to his failings, the heroic transformation narrative must be true.[22](#)

Five, reporters surrendered to the force of nationalism, to the belief that their country had been attacked and that they spoke to and for this country. Nationalism caused the news media to identify with the Bush administration and to endorse its policies--regularly referring to “we” when reporting on the wars against terror, waving digitized flags and wearing flag lapel pins, and using the Pentagon's labels (Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, or jingoistic names of their own like CNN's “America's New War,” NBC's “America at War,” and MSNBC's “Countdown: Iraq”) to identify their coverage. The power of nationalist sentiment was most dramatically voiced several days after the 9-11 attacks, by CBS News anchor Dan Rather on *Late Night with David Letterman*: “George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions, and, you know, it's just one American, wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where. And he'll make the call.” A month later Rather spoke about the impact of nationalism upon journalism: “I don't think you can be too patriotic; when in doubt, I would much prefer to err on the side of too much patriotism as opposed to too little.” Months after 9-11--in other words, after Bush had been deified--Rather, in an interview with the BBC, had entirely different views: “What we are talking about here . . . is a form of self-censorship. It starts with a feeling of patriotism within oneself. It carries through with a certain knowledge that the country as a whole--and for all the right reasons--felt and continues to feel this surge of patriotism within themselves. And one finds oneself

saying: 'I know the right question, but you know what? This is not exactly the right time to ask it.'²³)

Six, the news media refashioned Bush for the same reason they quickly forgot about the 2000 election fiasco. An institution inextricably tied to corporate and government elites, the American news media promotes a worldview sympathetic to these interests. The flawed presidential election, which saw a cartoonish son of privilege triumph (with fewer votes than his rival) as a result of the disenfranchisement of African-Americans and a one-vote Supreme Court majority, raised potentially troubling questions about American democracy. The crisis brought on by 9-11 could easily have renewed questions about Bush's legitimacy and the legitimacy of the American political system--at a time when the nation needed to lean on myths of national greatness and be unified behind a single heroic figure. Thus the media consortium investigating the Florida vote delayed announcing its findings. As the *New York Times* explained, "Until Sept. 11, the capital was riding a historically partisan period, with leading Democrats still portraying their president as 'appointed' by the Supreme Court. In a move that might have stoked the partisan tensions--but now seems *utterly irrelevant*--a consortium of news organizations . . . had been scheduled . . . to release the results of its ambitious undertaking to recount the Florida presidential ballots. (That has been put on hold indefinitely.)" [emphasis added]. When this information was finally released in November 2001, the news media read the results as evidence of a Bush electoral victory, although by many measures Gore would have prevailed. (In parsing the varying ways these results could have been tallied, the media downplayed the most salient fact: more people went to the polls intending to vote for Gore.) Facts like these, which questioned Bush's legitimacy and the legitimacy of American democracy itself--with its vital ideological myths--did not intrude upon the heroic rewriting of George Bush.²⁴

Bush was our national leader and we needed unhesitatingly to support his decisions. Quelling public fears and rallying around the flag, the news media inflated Bush into not merely a heroic but a more powerful political figure. By the time the press began to awaken from its patriotic fever dream, Bush's heroic visage had been fully chiseled, and his administration's ruinous policies were well under way. This new image, enhanced by a shameless exploitation of September 11, has allowed the Bush administration to vigorously pursue its agenda, invading Afghanistan and Iraq, shredding civil liberties, violating international accords, assaulting the environment, and waging an unrelenting class war. Attempts to thwart this agenda face a colossal, media-constructed obstacle: George W. Bush, great leader.

Notes

¹ The Bush action figure is available from K-B Toys (<http://www.kbtoys.com/>); for Bush's approval numbers see PollingReport.com (<http://www.pollingreport.com/>).

² Kenneth Walsh, "I will not yield. I will not rest," *U.S. News & World Report*, 1 Oct. 2001; Jack Thomas and Bella English, "The Making of a President," *Boston Globe* 22 Sep. 2001; "Everybody's President," *People*, 31 Dec. 2001.

³ Jeffrey Birnbaum, "The Making of a President" *Fortune*, 12 Nov. 2001; Howard Fineman, "A President Finds His True Voice," *Newsweek*, 24 Sep. 2001; James Klurfeld, "From the Rubble, Politician Bush Emerges as Presidential Leader," *Newsday*, 27 Sep. 2001; James Carney and John F. Dickerson, "A Work In Progress," *Time*, 22 Oct 2001.

- 4 Judy Keen, "Same President, Different Man in Office," *USA Today* 29 Oct. 2001; Richard Berke, "Jokes Remain, but Many Say Bush Is Showing Signs of War's Burden," *New York Times*, 8 Dec. 2001; Brian Williams, *The News with Brian Williams*, CNBC, 28 Dec. 2001; Howard Fineman and Martha Brant, "This Is Our Life Now," *Newsweek*, 3 Dec. 2001; Patrick E. Tyler and Elizabeth Bumiller, "Bush Offers Taliban 2nd Chance," *New York Times* 12 Oct. 2001.
- 5 "Bush Finds His Gravitas," *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 Sep. 2001: 8; Doyle McManus, "President Finds Voice, Leadership in Terrorism Crisis," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 Sep. 2001; Michael Duffy, *Washington Week in Review*, 2001 28 Dec. 2001; David Gregory, *The News with Brian Williams*, CNBC, 28 Dec. 2001.
- 6 Birnbaum, "The Making," *Fortune*; Michael Elliott, "We Will Not Fail," *Time* 1 Oct. 2001, 18; Judy Keen, "Strain of Iraq War Showing on Bush, Those Who Know Him Say," *USA Today*, 2 April 2003; Walsh, "I will not yield," *US News & World Report*; Fineman and Brant, "This Is Our Life Now," *Newsweek*; McKinnon quoted in Berke, "Jokes Remain," *New York Times*.
- 7 Jim Hoagland, "Putting Doubts to Rest," *Washington Post*, 23 Sep. 2001, B7; Birnbaum, "The Making," *Fortune*; *CBS Sunday Morning*, 9 Dec. 2001; Walsh, "I will not yield," *US News & World Report*; Martha Brant, "West Wing Story: Behind a Great Speech," *Newsweek* 26 Sep. 2001.
- 8 Card quoted in Walsh, "I will not yield," *US News & World Report*; Card quoted in Brant, "West Wing Story," *Newsweek*; Massimo Calabresi, et al., "Life on the Home Front," *Time* (Online) <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101011001/story3.html>, 2001.
- 9 David Broder, "Echoes of Lincoln," *Washington Post*, 23 Sep. 2001; Jay Winik, (Sunday) *Today Show*, 21 Oct. 2001.
- 10 According to a *Washington Post* poll taken in August 2003, 69 percent of Americans believed Hussein had a role in the 9-11 attacks (Dana Millbank and Claudea Deane, "Hussein Link to 9/11 Lingers in Many Minds," *Washington Post* 6 Sep 2003); public opinion about Iraq's use of chemical and biological weapons against Americans and about Iraqi hijackers can be found at the Program on International Policy Attitudes website (<http://www.pipa.org/>).
- 11 Rove quoted in Richard Berke, "In the White House, a Sense of What History Can Teach," *New York Times* 9 Jan. 2002 ; James Reston, "History Spurned," *Los Angeles Times* 7 Sep. 2003; Damian Whitworth, "Learning Curve for Bush, the History Man," *The (London) Times*, 12 Jan. 2002, 23; Toby Harnden, "Bush Studies the Past to Meet Present Challenges," *London Daily Telegraph*, 10 Jan 2002, 14; Whitworth, "Learning Curve for Bush."
- 12 Rove quoted in Berke, "In the White House," *New York Times*; Al Kamen, "In the Loop," *Washington Post*, 5 Dec. 2001.
- 13 "Historians File Suit to Quash White House Decree on Historical Records," *Common Dreams*, 29 Nov. 2001 (<http://www.commondreams.org/headlines01/1129-01.htm>).
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