

## Chapter 16

### CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF GEORGE W. BUSH

Jon Herbert and Andrew Wroe

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We will write, not footnotes, but chapters in the American story.  
(George W. Bush accepting the 2000 Republican Party nomination for the presidency, Philadelphia, 3 August 2000)

Before Bush was elected, he projected a presidency of extraordinary ambition. He, and the administration he headed, subsequently seemed driven by a desire for the momentous and the dramatic to the degree that it might be considered an administration mentality. Bush hated the “small ball” and his advisers consistently labelled him a “transformative president” (*The Economist* 2009). The ambitious rhetoric was backed by aspirations to institute major policy reforms. In foreign policy, Bush attempted a spectacular redirection of United States priorities and of its methods. In economic policy, he pursued an agenda of substantial tax cuts and extensive deregulation. In social policy, he launched radical reforms under the “compassionate conservative” label, trying to co-opt traditionally Democratic Party policy areas such as Medicare, education and Social Security. These reforms, Bush hoped, would change his Republican Party’s direction and image, trigger a realignment of the American electorate and create a permanent Republican majority. At the completion of Bush’s second term, it became legitimate to ask to what degree Bush had achieved these high goals and to identify the inheritance he passed on to his successor.

As Ralph (Chapter 6) explains, the assessment of Bush’s legacy will depend on the perspective of those writing the history. Assessments of the Clinton presidency, for example, rarely focused on the adminis-

tration's handling of the al-Qaeda threat until late in 2001. There will undoubtedly be changes in perspective. Some of the Bush administration's actions will look more significant in the context of future events, others less so. At the moment, we cannot be sure which will be which. The Bush legacy is likely to change from generation to generation. This conditionality applies to no more than the two headlines of the Bush legacy: the state of the American economy and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In each case, outcomes are uncertain. While it seems unlikely that Iraqi nationalism will ever tolerate the erecting of a George W. Bush statue in Baghdad's Firdos square, his administration might one day be credited with triggering the development of democracy in the Middle East. In the same way as Truman left the United States apparently trapped in a war in Korea but his historical reputation recovered, some argue that Bush may come to be seen as founding father of a new American foreign policy. The Bush economic legacy will depend upon the depth of the recession that unfolded as he left office. A speedy recovery will present Bush's tenure in a more positive light than will an economic catastrophe. Nevertheless, it is a legitimate time to assess Bush's two terms, before the self-righting quality of American democracy imposes itself: the worst blunders usually generate the greatest attempts by a presidential successor to address them. If President Obama addresses a crisis in one particularly dire area successfully, Bush's contribution to generating that crisis will appear less significant.

For all this qualification, however, the basic shape of the Bush legacy seems to be in place, and to reflect badly upon his presidency. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the series of events that would portray the Bush administration as a triumphal success.

## 1. FOREIGN POLICY

The Bush foreign policy project began with a promise to reject the Clinton style and, within a year, generated a radical rethinking of the American approach to the world. As Ralph and Houghton detail (Chapters 6 and 8), the administration's unilateralism was apparent before 9/11. The pledge to focus on American interests rather than on nation-building underpinned a different approach to the post-Cold War era. United States primacy would be defended and bolstered. However, 9/11 refocused the administration upon the threat of

terrorism. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the conceptual framework of the “war on terror”, the right to pre-emption and the desire for regime change, marked a radical shift. This approach, however, was allied to the early move to unilateralism and the pursuit of American interests. Bush chose to invade Iraq, and his unilateral approach allowed him to dismiss international concerns over American adventurism lightly. As Ralph details, he launched a “war” that was new in political, military and legal terms.

Even given the malleable foreign policy environment induced by 9/11, Bush’s achievements in winning domestic support for the war were significant. With minimal political conflict, he won congressional resolutions supporting his adventurism. Even more remarkably, when he decided to launch the so-called surge in Iraq, he did so despite the domestic forces lined up in opposition. The prosecution of the wars, however, was not a triumph and must be considered to be a significant part of the Bush legacy. The extraordinary expenditure of blood and money was notable in its own right but the mixed results derived from these sacrifices make the wars worthy of even more attention. As Bush left office, he passed the two unresolved conflicts on to his successor with uncertainty remaining over their final outcome. Many argued that the wars had been bungled, at the cost of thousands of lives, largely due to poor planning for the aftermath of initial hostilities. Donald Rumsfeld’s vision of a new United States military is often blamed for this failure although Ralph also blames the failure to examine neo-conservative assumptions about the Middle East population’s receptiveness to democratic revolution. While the administration argued that it deserved credit for the absence of further terrorist attacks upon the American homeland during Bush’s time in office, many claimed that Bush’s approach had actually antagonised and radicalised many elements in the Middle East, and made resisting terrorism far more difficult. The administration could argue, though it largely remains an untold story, that it had done much to decapitate the al-Qaeda network and wreck its funding networks. Hurst (Chapter 7) examines the administration’s efforts to develop its homeland security policy, and is cautiously positive. Others noted instead that al-Qaeda might be considered more dangerous as a more numerous series of loosely affiliated cells that could recruit easily from among the newly radicalised.

Considering the potential for terrorists to strike the United States is

to judge the Bush administration by its own chosen measure. Halting terror was its declared goal. A more standard analysis of Bush's legacy considers the status of American power in the world. America's military power, soft power and economic power have all changed for the worse during Bush's two terms.

America's actual military capability remains great. The speed at which both the Taliban government in Kabul and the Saddam regime in Baghdad were toppled defied many expert military predictions and seemed to warrant the label "shock and awe". The Bush presidency still undermined the United States military's status, however. First, the military proved good at winning standard battles but poor at dealing with those battles' aftermath. The military could not police and rebuild the battlefield and therefore remake nations as the Bush administration required. The neo-conservative vision was dashed, although neo-conservatives contended that Rumsfeld's poor planning and dreams of lower troop commitments were to blame. Second, at the end of Bush's term, military resources, particularly personnel, were clearly stretched. Demanding more tours of duty from enlistees and recruiting aggressively, the United States military's capacity was nonetheless restricted by its presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, and arguably found its capacity limited even in those locations. Furthermore, the unwillingness of the United States polity to sustain such drawn-out actions undermined the utility of military power. The "Vietnam syndrome", allegedly kicked by Bush's father, seemed to have returned, bringing the nation's ability to commit the military to extended conflict into doubt.

Bush's legacy also includes a serious denuding of America's soft power. Joseph Nye argues that American power is drawn partly from the American capacity to "attract others by the legitimacy of U.S. policies and the values that underlie them" (Nye 2004). To a degree, American leadership depends upon the moral argument implicit in a rhetoric of liberty, democracy and justice. United States politicians present the nation as the upholder of these values. The Bush administration's willingness to abandon them damaged American's standing internationally.

Most obviously, events at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib squandered the United States's claim to moral leadership as it became clear that it was willing to torture and abuse prisoners rather than respect human rights. As the Abu Ghraib story broke, Bill Graham, Canada's foreign

minister at the time, had a meeting with Bush. He described Bush's reaction to hearing about the abuse thus: "This is un-American. Americans don't do this. People will realize Americans don't do this." Graham argues, however, that

the problem for the United States, and indeed for the free world, is that because of this – Guantanamo, and the "torture memos" from the White House . . . – people around the world don't believe that anymore. They say, No, Americans are capable of doing such things and have done them, all the while hypocritically criticizing the human-rights records of others. (Murphy and Purdum 2009)

Quite apart from bequeathing the problem of how to handle the unconvicted enemy combatants held at Guantánamo Bay, Bush passed on to his successor a much tarnished image of the United States and, with it, weakened American persuasiveness in the world.

This weakened persuasiveness was compounded by the administration's international application of media spin. As most dramatically demonstrated by Colin Powell's presentation to the United Nations of the case for war against Iraq, the administration frequently manipulated information for political effect. The subsequent absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq did much to fritter away America's intelligence advantage in the world. If trusted, the United States can claim that their technological capabilities allow them unique access to intelligence. In contrast, Florida's Democratic Senator Bob Graham argued:

One of our difficulties now is getting the rest of the world to accept our assessment of the seriousness of an issue, because they say, You screwed it up so badly with Iraq, why would we believe that you're any better today? And it's a damn hard question to answer. (Murphy and Purdum 2009)

Diminished American soft power was reflected in public attitudes to the United States across the world. The loss of moral authority also provided an opportunity for other leaders to trumpet their anti-Americanism. Iraq and Guantánamo were a boon to Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, for example.

After its first term, the administration acknowledged the need to change approach. A conscious attempt was made to recover soft power, most notably through Secretary of State Rice's peripatetic charm offensive. Ralph argues that this change reflected a shift towards realism at the expense of the neo-conservative vision. North Korea and Iran would be drawn into diplomatic talks over their development of nuclear weapons, rather than being isolated. The administration began to recognise more fully the significance of China's rise and the increased hostility of Russia under Putin. Ironically, Bush's second-term activities seemed to echo more faithfully his original campaign pledges of 2000 to promote American interests in an unfriendly world of great powers. The legacy of these efforts was limited. Both Houghton and Ralph argue that this revised approach generated some recovery of American credibility abroad. Houghton argues, however, that structural tensions between Europe and the United States remained over issues such as torture, terror and global warming, and that, despite the rise of Atlanticist leaders in Europe, the Bush administration was still very much part of the problem.

The inheritance passed on to President Obama, therefore, looked dire. Two ongoing wars and diminished American power are a very poor legacy. The end of the Bush administration was even marked by a new wave of declinist thinking based on diminishing American power. Scholars observed that the United States might lose its pre-eminent status in the world. Perhaps as importantly, fundamental questions remained on the future direction of American foreign policy. The question posed by 9/11 remained: how would the United States address the terrorist threat to prevent more attacks? Bush made terror his central focus and attempted to attack existing terrorist networks, to eliminate terrorist havens through an aggressive strategy to bring rogue states under control, and to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The war on extremist Muslim fundamentalism was unambiguously the first priority. Lynch and Singh argue a case for continuity based on this approach and see, therefore, the Bush doctrine as the key constituent of his legacy (Lynch and Singh 2008).

Others argue that the Bush approach was discredited. Obama inherited a foreign policy in great disrepute. At home, Americans felt that war in Iraq, particularly, was a mistake, and domestic support for the war on terror was low. Policymakers recognised the costs implicit

in the Bush approach, noting diminished American moral suasion and international standing. The ability to co-opt the support of multilateral institutions, on the rare occasions the Bush administration chose this route, declined accordingly. Additionally, not all policy problems fitted comfortably within the war on terror's frame of reference. For example, how could the Bush doctrine inform conduct of United States–Chinese relations? The identification of terror as the overriding concern guiding American foreign policy involved costs that even the Bush administration, in its second term, became unwilling to bear, as demonstrated by the shift back towards realism. It seems likely that Bush's foreign policy will come to be seen as another experiment among American attempts to find a coherent post-Cold War policy. Bush rejected the previous experiment, Clinton's "engagement and enlargement", and pursued instead a neo-conservative alternative. That approach seems largely discredited, involving costs that the United States could not bear.

The discrediting of the Bush experiment bequeathed an opportunity to the incoming Obama administration. Despite two ongoing wars, Obama was given the chance to develop a fresh experiment in American foreign policymaking. He could define what the prime concerns would be, particularly whether the pursuit of terrorists would play a definitive role. He could reshape this pursuit, and re-examine the interaction between this priority and other American interests. The very interpretation of terror as a policy problem could be reassessed, begging questions about its status as a foreign and military challenge rather than a criminal one. The impacts of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo and torture memorandums allowed Obama to address the balance between civil liberties and resisting terror. Indeed, Bush's failings may allow Obama the opportunity to change direction radically again, perhaps returning to Jimmy Carter's emphasis on human rights or reinventing Clinton's democratic enlargement. The opprobrium attached to Bush's foreign policy is an integral part of his legacy but it also gave his successor substantial leeway to reinvent American foreign policy.

Bush's foreign policy after 9/11 was intended to reshape the world and maintain American primacy. Even if the conflict in Iraq succeeds and triggers a wave of Middle East democratisation, Bush oversaw a decline in American power and left his successor a series of unresolved policy problems at the expense of many lives. As many of

Bush's ideas were discredited, Bush effectively issued President Obama with a warrant for leadership. Whether Obama will have the opportunity to concentrate on these potential reinventions is unclear, however, since his first priority proved to be the well-being of the American economy.

## 2. ECONOMIC POLICY

The Bush legacy in economic policy was transformed by the events late in his second term but the administration had already had a significant impact. This impact suggested unquestioning support for many tenets of "Reaganomics": the Bush administration advocated low taxes, restrictive monetary policy and deregulation.

On entering office, Bush declared tax cuts to be his first major priority, as achieved through the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 and, later, the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003. The former, which included a tax rebate and cuts in income tax, capital gains tax and estate tax, was a particularly notable achievement, given the inauspicious circumstances under which Bush was elected and his limited political capital. As Wilson details (Chapter 10), the administration embarked upon an extensive campaign of deregulation.

Where Bush seemed to diverge from the Reagan orthodoxy was in federal spending. Under Bush, the federal government greatly increased its overall spending. Bush was labelled a "big government conservative" as the budget surplus he inherited was replaced by a record annual deficit and the United States national debt soared (Barnes 2003, 2006). These changes rendered the United States more dependent upon those prepared to lend to it to sustain its deficits, notably the Chinese government, which bought high volumes of treasury bonds.

The deficit and debt are clearly central parts of the Bush legacy. In themselves, they would have demanded attention from Bush's successor. Most of the economic headlines from Bush's tenure date from his last year, however. Bush oversaw the development of a major recession. Gross domestic product fell and unemployment rose. The precipitous decline in the Dow Jones index represented trillions of dollars in lost investments. Federal funds were further drained as tax revenues dropped. The financial crisis induced the Bush adminis-



tration to propose a \$700 billion bank bail-out plan while the Fed spent reserves fighting the collapse. Bush left federal finances and the American economy in a parlous state.

Wilson suggests that responsibility for the recession beginning in 2008 can be distributed widely. Bankers' reckless risk-taking, flawed regulatory systems, capital carelessly or even ignorantly invested, consumers taking the wrong attitude to the bubble, low interest rates, bankers' overcompensating after the crisis broke and denying the economy liquidity, house owners gambling on rising prices. Many are implicated. There is strong reason, however, to consider the recession part of Bush's legacy. The administration held a unique vantage point from which to observe and address many of the mistakes listed above but failed to do so. This failure, Wilson explains, was rooted in the administration's ideological commitment to free markets as well as to poor policymaking processes that prevented it from examining assumptions and alternatives properly.

This criticism is tempered by the administration's pragmatism in response to the financial crisis. The administration did not deliver a coherent or immediately effective answer but its response was not bound rigidly by neo-liberal ideology. Taking Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, AIG and numerous banks into federal ownership, even if only partially, hardly sat comfortably with the mantra of "let the market decide". Admittedly, the decision to allow Lehman Brothers to go bankrupt may have triggered the worst of the crisis but Wilson credits the administration with ideological flexibility in the face of disaster. The Bush administration's response may be remembered as averting complete financial collapse in 2008, even if it may also be remembered as contributing significantly to the cause of the crash. Nonetheless, Bush's legacy included passing on to his successor a range of serious economic problems, including, amid the recession, a developing avalanche of foreclosures, a corresponding collapse in the housing market and the continuing presence of so-called toxic assets poisoning banks' balance sheets and restricting liquidity.

Just as significantly, the administration's policies in response to the crisis posed a challenge to the Reagan economic orthodoxy. Emphasising the widespread support in Washington for re-regulation of financial markets, and noting much greater federal involvement in the economy, some commentators saw the crisis as the end of the small-government, market-driven, low-tax era. Faith in markets as allocatory

tools was shaken considerably. The economic failures were seen not just as Bush's failure but represented the decline of an entire series of economic values. In the simplest interpretations, Bush was cast as the modern-day Herbert Hoover, the poster-boy for the end of the Reagan era, helplessly bound by the collapsing regime's ideology. While this narrative would be a particularly harsh judgement, given the administration's abandonment of the orthodoxy during the financial crisis, Bush's legacy may include the start of a substantial shift in ideology away from an ultra-free-market American economy. At the least, the free-market agenda suffered a public relations disaster of proportions last exceeded in the 1920s and 1930s. Recession, mass foreclosures, public resentment of bankers and the collapse in value of individuals' 401k retirement accounts (tax-privileged savings invested in the stock market) all suggested that the Reagan orthodoxy had been discredited in the American public's eyes.

As did the recession, this discrediting of the free-market orthodoxy spread more widely than United States domestic politics, having profound repercussions for American power. Over a sixty-year period, the United States had constructed a limited international consensus over a particular value system in international economics. The series of economic values embodied in the "Washington consensus" of free markets, limited public sectors, low inflation and low taxes looked less convincing in early 2009 than in early 2008. Advocates of alternative approaches were quick to articulate this fall, some even suggesting that they detected the rise of a competing Beijing consensus. The persuasiveness of American economic values had been compromised.

Further sources of American power were jeopardised by the financial collapse and recession. The increased federal debt made the United States more vulnerable to those holding that debt, as demonstrated by stateside concerns that the Chinese expressed worry over the size of their United States treasury bond holdings (Wines 2009). The status of the dollar as the world's reserve currency was called into question, suggesting that the United States might lose the benefits associated with the dollar's special standing. Neither did the administration capture the credibility to be gained as primary advocates of free trade. As Chorev describes (Chapter 9), failures at the World Trade Organization drove the Bush administration to a strategy of competitive liberalisation through bilateral agreements that seemed subordinated to foreign policy concerns. While blame for WTO dis-

agreements should not fall directly on Bush, he still passed the stalled development round of negotiations to the new administration with little immediate potential for resolution. Just as Bush's term was marked by a decline in America's military and soft power, his final months also involved a distinct weakening in American economic power.

In many senses, Bush's economic bequest to Obama looked like a liability. An ongoing recession with major problems unresolved and a weakening of American international economic power presented an extraordinary challenge for the new president. The enormous and growing federal debt seemed likely to constrain the new administration's policy options. Furthermore, the new administration faced the problem of what to do with newly nationalised corporations; federal part-ownership was unlikely to be a permanent arrangement so the Obama administration would have both to manage these assets in the short term and dispose of them in the longer run. Nevertheless, the Bush administration's failures and the discrediting of the values associated with the Reagan regime did offer Obama a further leadership opportunity. It fell to the new president to propose a new level of federal intervention in the economy, to interpret the nature of the ongoing crisis and the measures needed to alleviate it at a time when the nation required action. Arguably, Bush presented Obama with not just the presidency but with an environment in which he could propose radical changes in federal economic policy.

### 3. SOCIAL POLICIES

Bush had ambitious plans to reform American social policy. His vision was not the traditional conservative one of cutting federal programmes. Instead, he advocated a compassionate conservatism designed to win the Republican Party long-term electoral dominance and to change the American welfare state radically. Expectations, then, were high but his legacy here was distinctly mixed.

Bush certainly piloted radical reforms in education and Medicare. As Parker details in Chapter 12, Bush's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) installed a framework of accountability and testing in public schools that seemed set to endure as its primary advocate left office. It represented a step change in federal influence over public schools'

conduct. The legislation attracted widespread criticism from diverse viewpoints. One of the most serious was that the act had little effect on children's learning. Given the importance attached to education in a globalised economy, there was little sense that Bush had solved America's educational problems, or even improved matters much. Whatever the criticisms of the programme, NCLB represented a significant political victory for Bush.

In Chapter 11 Waddan describes the significance of the massive new Medicare benefit for prescription medicines established under the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 (MMA). The new benefit provided many elderly people with relief from oppressive medical costs, but at great cost to the federal government and therefore to the American taxpayer. For this reason, Bush was criticised by many Republicans for further expanding the size of government but the MMA was significantly conservative in some respects, as Waddan shows. By cranking up the cost of Medicare and challenging the basic presumptions of the original programme, Bush may, ironically, have brought a future radical, and perhaps conservative, reform of Medicare closer.

To balance these achievements, there is a substantial list of legislative failures in social policy. Bush's proposals for faith-based initiatives did not gain any legislative traction. His Social Security proposal's demise reinforced the reputation of the issue as the untouchable "third rail" of American politics, and dissipated the momentum derived from Bush's 2004 victory. His liberal immigration proposal failed to command the bipartisan coalition needed, and collapsed amid the acrimony of election season. Bush particularly struggled under the conditions of divided government after the 2006 mid-terms, a shortcoming Fullam and Gitelson (Chapter 15) blame upon the administration's attempt to combine partisanship with the permanent campaign between 2001 and 2005.

In the areas of immigration and Social Security, Bush passed on developing crises to his successor. The immigration system was widely recognised as in crisis, with over ten million undocumented persons living in the United States and a seemingly porous border, although definitions of that crisis varied according to political perspective. The problem can be presented in cultural, budgetary, labour-market, administrative, humanitarian and security terms. Given Bush's failure, Obama would need to find policy solutions as well as political

consensus to resolve these problems. The Social Security failure contributed to an even greater problem. Having increased federal government's liabilities through the MMA, Bush left the United States facing an entitlements crisis. The crisis cannot be blamed on Bush alone as it pre-dated his time in office but he failed to resolve it, allowing a full business cycle to pass without addressing the fiscal problems implicit in the ageing of the baby-boom generation. Indeed, Bush left an enormous deficit, starving the federal government of resources to target to the entitlements crisis. More jaundiced observers saw these outcomes not as chance circumstance but as a conscious ideological effort to "starve the beast", the federal government, by denying it the money needed to sustain its commitments. Whether an intentional product of a starve-the-beast strategy, a more benevolently motivated product of compassionate and big-government conservatism, or simple misjudgement, Bush passed a serious social policy problem to his successor. America's environmental problems and broad health-care problems beyond Medicare could be added to the list of concerns passed to President Obama.

The Bush legacy could also include the damage done to the reputation of his unsuccessful policy ideas. Compassionate conservatism and the ownership society were both concepts offered to underpin the administration's approach to social policy. While the phrase compassionate conservatism is unlikely to be revived in the United States, the ideas that underpinned it were substantive. Under compassionate conservatism, the Republicans offered centrist policy positions in policy areas normally associated with the Democratic Party – for example, recognising the disadvantaged's plight and presenting policies designed to improve social justice, often through local-community institutions and empowerment (Gerson 2007). The ownership society idea, used to explain and defend the Social Security proposals, was also more than shallow rhetoric. Federal government power would be used to expand ownership of, for example, property and allow more people to experience the wealth and security borne of the country's economic success. The ownership society's political appeal was brought into question by the spectacular failure of Bush's Social Security reform to capture public imagination. Moreover, after the 2008 financial crash, ideas associated with stock market investments looked even less appealing. Despite its apparent electoral appeal in 2000, compassionate conservatism also failed to inspire

public support. These two ideas have probably been stigmatised by their association with the unpopular Bush administration.

While the breadth of Bush's achievements in social policy was limited, the major reforms he did achieve in education and health care could look even more significant from a longer historical perspective, depending on students' educational achievement and future reform of Medicare. Bush also amassed high-profile legislative defeats, however, and passed major policy problems to the Obama administration. As Long and Ashbee each suggests (Chapters 4 and 13) Bush's greatest legacy in social policy may post-date his time in office. His appointment of two relatively young conservatives to the Supreme Court could shape judicial decisions for many years to come. In aggregate, though, Bush offered an experiment in conservative social policy-making that Washington was not willing to embrace. Notably, members of his own party were among his fiercest critics.

### 3. THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

Bush's ambition for the Republican Party was nothing less than long-term political dominance in the electorate and Congress. While he helped the party to electoral victories in 2002 and 2004, the number of people identifying themselves as Republicans, the volumes of Republican fund-raising and perceptions of the Republican brand had all weakened significantly by 2008 (Fullam and Gitelson, Chapter 15). Bush suffered disastrous opinion-poll ratings in his second term and weakened the party's standing on many issues, including national security and the economy. The Republican presidential candidate in 2008, Senator John McCain, tried to distance himself from the incumbent president, recognising that the association could only harm his chances of victory. Over the course of his presidency, Bush lost the trust of many within his own party, failed to reconstruct the party's image and divided his party while unifying the Democrats.

Bush's legislative strategy gradually alienated many politicians and activists within the Republican Party. In part, this alienation came from a breach between Congress and executive. Legislators resented the administration's assertive manner and refusal to acknowledge congressional prerogatives. Pfiffner describes in Chapter 3 a number of actions that riled legislators as the administration expanded executive power. Other examples, such as deceit over the potential cost of the

MMA and the presence or otherwise of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, reduced Republican trust in Bush. More generally, however, policies Bush proposed were rarely what conservatives, the party's core, wanted. While he garnered Republican votes for his education and Medicare reforms, much of this support was offered reluctantly. Republicans in Congress would not take the substantial political risk of reforming the Social Security programme as Bush proposed. His "grand bargain" in immigration policy did much to mobilise conservative support, but mostly against the president. Frequently, and especially in the second term, Bush's proposals set him at loggerheads with elements in his party.

Most parts of the conservative movement found reasons to loathe the Bush administration, whether they be fiscal conservatives horrified by the increasing deficit and growth in federal spending or libertarians resistant to Bush's assertions of executive power. National security conservatives watched developments in Iraq with dismay. Ashbee (Chapter 13) outlines the disillusionment of the Christian right as the administration developed. While Bush offered a born-again biography and some appropriate rhetoric and sentiment, he delivered little in terms of policy. On abortion, he discussed a culture of life but only threw his weight behind the partial-birth ban. On same-sex marriage he failed to mobilise resources behind a constitutional amendment. He compromised on stem-cell research. However one classified Bush's conservatism, it seemed to drive key Republican constituencies away from the Bush presidency.

Repeatedly, Bush overestimated his party's willingness to support his unorthodox policy initiatives. The demise of his Social Security proposal and the temporary defeat of his \$700 billion bail-out package for American banks, bookends to his second term, both exemplify Bush's limited capacity to convince his party to support his controversial proposals.

As Bush failed in his relations with established elements of his party, his attempt to widen the party's appeal also crumbled. The dream of a lasting realignment depended upon a change in the party's appeal, particularly drawing in racial and ethnic groups and women by quashing the Republicans' image as the uncaring party. Compassionate conservatism's legislative failure clearly hindered the realignment project, as did two particular incidents. First, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina projected the image of an administration

that was incompetent and indifferent to the flood victims' plight. Bush seemed not to be engaged by the disaster. Rap artist Kanye West caught the mood, saying simply: "George Bush doesn't care about black people." The failure of Bush's proposed immigration reform reinforced the impression. The proposal, intended to attract large swathes of the Latino population, triggered resistance that reaffirmed the Republicans as the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) party of restrictionist immigration policy and cultural intolerance. Bush provided a lead that his party was not willing to follow, and his dream of reconstituting the party was dashed. Historians will have to decide whether to credit him with attempting to lead the change or to condemn him for failing to persuade his party to follow.

As Bush vacated his office, his party embarked upon a rancorous reassessment of its ideology and policies. The departing president left his party demoralised, divided and uncertain of its future direction. In contrast, he left the Democrats revitalised. Bush demonstrated a penchant for assisting Democratic progress. His strident partisanship late in his first term activated Democratic resentment and, with it, fund-raising. After his 2004 victory, Bush offered the downhearted Democrats an ideal rallying point by suggesting partial privatisation of Social Security. Unified, the Democrats resisted the reform. As Chorev details (Chapter 9) Bush's competitive liberalisation approach allowed Democrats to reconcile their perennial problem over the trade issue by advocating improved environment and labour standards without alienating crucial business constituencies. After 2005, an unpopular, failing but highly partisan Bush proved the Democrat's greatest asset.

The continuing partisanship in Washington and the nation was an integral part of the Bush legacy. Partisanship was present before Bush was elected, and it would be wrong to blame him for the partisan sentiment stirred up by the 2000 election controversy but Bush did much to augment partisan ill-feeling. Despite promises to act as a bipartisan leader, Bush rarely did so. Parker (Chapter 12) describes the bipartisan coalition developed to support NCLB but this proved to be the exception, not the rule. Politicising a national catastrophe, Bush consciously exploited the foreign policy crisis of 9/11 for partisan advantage, abandoning any pretence that partisan politics should stop at the water's edge. That partisanship was reflected in the fifty-plus-one electoral and legislative strategy detailed by Fullam and Gitelson, and did much to establish Bush as a "divider, not a uniter" (Jacobson



2008). Early exchanges in the Obama presidency over the new president's economic stimulus package suggested that the highly partisan environment in Washington had survived Bush's departure. The Texan's pledges to address the problem, made in 2000, seemed hollow as he passed this sour legacy to his successor.

As Bush left office, he had increased Republican influence in the Supreme Court but had overseen the loss of Republican power in the executive and legislative branches. He left his party in electoral and ideological disarray.

#### CONCLUSION: THE END OF THE REAGAN ERA AND THE OBAMA OPPORTUNITY

Between 2001 and 2009, Bush weakened American power abroad, embarked upon two wars that had not concluded as he left office, took the country into a financial crisis and deep recession, failed to achieve many of his desired social policies, and oversaw the fragmenting of his political party and the abandonment of many of his core political values. While one may note the absence of further terror attacks on the United States homeland, some social policy successes and the electoral victories of 2002 and 2004, it is hard to describe Bush's overall record even as positively as "mixed".

The public reaction to Bush's record was negative, and contributed to Obama's triumph in 2008. The Obama presidency and Democratic control of the 111th Congress are important elements of Bush's legacy. Reactions to the 2008 result offered interesting commentary on the departing president. Obama won a mere 53 per cent of the vote, yet his victory was greeted by many as the beginning of a new era. Such analyses did not reflect the vote totals or changes in partisan representation in Congress but the ferocity of the nation's rejection of the incumbent Bush administration. As David Letterman put it within hours of polling booths closing: "Ladies and gentlemen, Barack Obama is our new president. And I think I speak for most Americans when I say, anybody mind if he starts a little early?"

Some even claimed that a realignment in American politics was underway, presenting the Bush presidency as the end of a conservative era that began with Ronald Reagan. Under Bush, many conservative ideas had been brought into disrepute across a range of policy areas, thus offering Obama extraordinary opportunities for presidential

leadership. Yet it is premature to regard Bush's presidency as the end of a period of conservative dominance.

Bush's legacy also involved passing on to his successor extraordinary constraints. An enormous budget deficit in a time of recession both dictated that Obama made the economy his primary policy concern, and limited the options available to address the problem. Big spending programmes would confront the major obstacle of the federal deficit, as a starve-the-beast strategy would dictate. Addressing the deficit in the long term seemed likely to demand spending cuts. Inheriting two ongoing wars demanded immediate attention to Bush's primary strategic concerns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The desperate, and worsening, state of entitlements funding suggested that federal support for social services would be easier to cut than to sustain at existing levels. Obama was presented with federal ownership of numerous financial institutions and the long-term debate seemed likely to concern the means by which these institutions would be returned to the private sector. While commentators argued about whether the end of the Bush presidency marked a fundamental change in America's politics, a series of policy inheritances, largely derived from the Bush terms, appeared likely to limit Obama's options and, in some cases, push his administration towards distinctly conservative solutions, such as federal spending cuts and high-profile privatisations. Commentators arguing that the Obama administration could sweep all vestiges of conservative dominance away failed to recognise the nature of the new president's inheritance. The Bush legacy would constrain and direct his successor, maintaining a continuing influence rather than being consigned instantly to history.

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