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The national memory often confuses hubris with greatness. That's good news for George W. Bush.

by Ross Douthat

Redeeming Dubya



Photo by Larry Downing/Reuters/Corbis

The idea that history might rehabilitate George W. Bush seems too ludicrous to be seriously entertained. His approval ratings have been so low for so long, it's hard to remember that he was ever popular. The Iraq War, his signal endeavor, has lasted for more years than America's involvement in the Second World War and seems likely to last longer; a fragile truce in a wrecked, misgoverned country is the best the next president can hope for.

Even many of the president's ideological allies consider him a failure—either a false conservative who betrayed the Reagan legacy, or a blunderer who got the big decisions right but couldn't follow through. His liberal foes, whose bill of indictments has swollen to the size of *Gravity's Rainbow*, while away the hours until January 2009 by arguing over just how terrible a president he's been. The worst since Nixon? Since Hoover? Since James Buchanan?

If Bush himself were confronted with this discouraging analysis, though, it's easy to imagine his retort—delivered, no doubt, with a flash of that famous smirk: *So you're saying I've got nowhere to go but up.*

Before you laugh, consider that nearly every presidential reputation, however tarnished, eventually finds someone willing to defend it. At the very least, some right-wing writers and historians will rise to defend Bush's legacy. But something more than partisan apologetics will be needed for his presidency to be remembered as something other than a failure. Ronald Reagan's status became secure only after left-of-center historians began to praise him; likewise, Harry Truman's reputation has risen from the Bush-esque depths of his disastrous second term in part because Republicans as well as Democrats have

come to claim him as a hero.

Which means that to earn the sort of vindication he seems to blithely expect, George W. Bush will have to win over not only centrists but at least some liberals.

Again, stifle that laugh. Bush won over a certain sort of liberal once before, the crusading, hawkish sort that felt the tug of Bush's moral certainty after 9/11 and was moved—at least until Iraq turned sour—by his confidence in America's ability to remake the world.

Imagining that these liberals, and others, might be won over again requires two big assumptions. First, assume that the years immediately after Bush leaves office pass without domestic calamity. If the current economic downturn becomes another Great Depression, for instance, his reputation will be buried as deep as Hoover's or Buchanan's. If America continues to muddle through, however, Bush's domestic record—which is lackluster without being nearly as bad as his critics, left and right, often claim it's been—will probably vanish down the memory hole that has swallowed the domestic record of nearly every president not named Roosevelt or Johnson.

This is the easy part of the equation. The harder assumption involves what will remain after “compassionate conservatism” has faded into the same oblivion that claimed Nixon's “New Federalism” and Bill Clinton's “New Covenant.” Foreign policy, that is, where for history's judgment to turn favorable, America's intervention in Iraq eventually needs to come out looking like a success story rather than a folly.

This seems improbable, to put it mildly. But the crucial word here is *eventually*. The Bush administration has often seemed bent on vindicating, in the short run and by force of arms, Francis Fukuyama's famous *long-term* prediction that liberal democracy will ultimately triumph. Now Bush's hopes for vindication depend on the Middle East's following a gradual, Fukuyaman track toward free markets, democratic government, and the “end of history.” And just as crucially, they depend on American troops' staying in Iraq for as long as it takes for that to happen. If these events come to pass—if the Iraq of 2038 or so is stable, democratic, and at peace with its neighbors, and if American troops have maintained a constant presence in the country—no one should be surprised to hear hawkish liberals as well as conservatives taking up the idea that George W. Bush deserves a great deal of the credit.

I do not mean to suggest that this is a likely outcome, or that it would be a just one. The cost of the Iraq War, in lives and dollars and squandered opportunities, ought to far outweigh the possibility that a long-term American presence might push the Middle East in a direction it was headed anyway. But when things work out in the long run—and especially when we can claim the credit—Americans tend to forgive their leaders for the crimes and errors of the moment.

That's why—to judge by the rankings that historians and pollsters regularly churn out—we've forgiven Teddy Roosevelt his role in the bloody and disgraceful occupation of the Philippines. It's why we've pardoned Woodrow Wilson for the part his feckless idealism played in unleashing decades of strife and tyranny in Europe. It's why we've granted Harry Truman absolution for the military blundering that prolonged the Korean War and brought us to the brink of nuclear conflict.

All of these presidents benefited, as Bush hopes to benefit, from the consonance between their sweeping, often hubristic goals and the gradual upward trajectory in human affairs. Despite our crimes, the Philippines turned out well enough in the long run, and so did South Korea; in the very long run, so did post-World War I Europe. (Indeed, if LBJ or Nixon had only found a way to prop up South Vietnam until the 1990s, they might have been forgiven the outrageous cost in blood and treasure, and remembered as Trumanesque heroes rather than as goats.)

But these well-respected presidents have benefited, as well, from the American tendency to overvalue activist leaders. So a bad president like Wilson is preferred, in our rankings and our hearts, to a good but undistinguished manager like Calvin Coolidge. A sometimes impressive, oft-erratic president like Truman is lionized, while the more even-keeled greatness of Dwight D. Eisenhower is persistently undervalued. John F. Kennedy is hailed for escaping the Cuban missile crisis, which his own misjudgments set in motion, while George H. W. Bush, who steered the U.S. through the fraught final moments of the Cold War with admirable caution, is caricatured as a ditherer who needed Margaret Thatcher around to keep him from going wobbly.

Few presidents have seemed as conscious of this reality as George W. Bush, perhaps because he had the example of his father—competent, cautious, and defeated for reelection—to look back on. The younger Bush’s governing style has been defined by an attempt to be everything his father wasn’t: by the pursuit of greatness, rather than mere competence; by an impatience with “small ball” and a yearning to play what *The Weekly Standard’s* Fred Barnes called the “rebel in chief”; by rhetoric that associated him as much with crusading liberals like Wilson and Kennedy as with his Republican predecessors; and by an abiding faith that his goals would earn him history’s blessing, whatever today’s polls might say.

In this sense, it might be said that a too-keen awareness of the American tendency to associate great leadership with world-historical ambition has wrecked the presidency of George W. Bush. But the enthusiasm for Barack Obama and John McCain suggests that the yearning, on the left and right alike, for presidents who will pursue greatness has only been enhanced by the debacle in Iraq. This is good news for Bush, who has to hope that the same propensity that ruined his administration will redeem his reputation. But it’s dangerous news for America. Those who rehabilitate the follies of the past are condemned to repeat them.

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