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GEORGE W. BUSH

Bush on His Record

The president defends his democracy agenda and his economic interventionism.

By [KIMBERLEY A. STRASSEL](#)

Air Force One

As he sits at his mile-high desk, clad in his Air Force One crew jacket, George W. Bush is as he has ever been: upbeat, focused, confident in his past decisions and in the future.

This is remarkable given the up and downs -- lately downs -- of his administration. Through it all, the president has acted on his own convictions, a trait that has inspired both violent critics and passionate defenders.

In a more than hour-long interview, Mr. Bush tells me about his tenure. He ticks off his personal list of domestic achievements: No Child Left Behind, which he says was not only an "education reform" but a "civil rights measure"; a costly Medicare prescription-drug program, which also created health-savings accounts and put "people in charge of their own health-care decisions"; his faith-based initiative, which he says was not about making the state a "religious recruiter" but about creating a government mentality that says "if it works, fund it"; his tax cut, which he credits in part for "52 months of uninterrupted job growth." He also is proud of "fighting off protectionism and promoting trade," and his success at getting Trade Promotion Authority back in 2002.

Mr. Bush had many big plans that never came to fruition, from school vouchers to radical health-care reform. He considers Social Security and immigration the "two big issues that were unfinished." His immigration plan infuriated his base, which viewed it as amnesty. He remains unrepentant. "Immigration was a very tough issue, and I knew it would be tough because it's a very emotional issue . . . On the other hand, the system was broken, falling apart, and people's lives were being affected in a way that was really not worthy of our country."

He also won't agree that Social Security reform was a casualty of the Iraq war. "Social Security did not pass because legislative bodies tend to be risk-averse, and restructuring, reforming Social Security requires a certain amount of risk. And the idea of asking members of Congress to deal with a problem that is not imminent is difficult." He contents himself with having "laid out some solutions" and hoping a future president will take courage from the fact he campaigned on it twice, "proving it was not the third or fourth or fifth rail of American politics."

He's confident "there will be a period of time when free-market, conservative supply-siders will study the Bush tax cuts and say the following: One, it helped us recover from a recession; and two, by holding down nondefense discretionary spending, we were on our way to balancing the budget." That latter part might be a leap for conservatives, whose own remembrances of the Bush spending record include farm bills, earmarks and the president's reluctance to wield a veto pen.

Yet the president remains adamant his budget troubles were the result of a ramp-up in defense spending. "The problem I had on the budget, in terms of perception, was, one we were at war, and I had pledged to mothers, fathers, spouses, children, that their loved ones would have what it takes . . . I refused to compromise on the military."

The deficit has exploded partly as a result of the administration's recent financial interventions. Mr. Bush remains convinced they were necessary to prevent the economy from failing and to "preserve the free-market system." "I think people will look back at this period in time and say that George W. Bush, when confronted with a significant financial problem, put all chips in."

Is he concerned that putting all the chips in has potentially laid the groundwork for an unprecedented era of big government? "I worry about some using the excuse of rescuing the economy to undermine free-market principles, whether it be domestically or internationally, I worry that the idea of trying to regulate the markets -- which requires some regulation no question -- but the danger is overregulation . . . So, yes, I'm concerned." This is why, he says, he gave his speech on free markets (in New York City on Nov. 13), and one reason he hosted the G-20 meeting in Washington a few days later. "I wanted to make sure that we send a clear message that while there were excesses, we should not destroy markets."

The action that will always most define the Bush presidency will be the invasion of Iraq. It is also the decision he remains most visibly passionate about, especially given it was the cornerstone of his broader "freedom agenda" in the Middle East. That agenda, he says, is working, and he remains confident that while it "was widely criticized by some as being hopelessly naïve and idealistic, is really the only practical way to provide long-term security . . ." He is convinced the region is stepping into a new era, and will continue on that path "unless America loses nerve in our belief in the universality of freedom."

The president suggests his program that has provided antiretroviral drugs to 2.2 million African HIV-AIDS victims is also partly aimed at national security. Freedom includes "freedom from disease, because [terrorists] can exploit hopelessness, and that's the only thing they can exploit."

I ask the president about the Iraq violence of 2006, and whether the surge shouldn't have happened sooner. He answers that "what seems like an eternity today may seem like a moment tomorrow," but he also acknowledges politics complicated the process. "In 2005 we were feeling pretty good about ourselves because the political process was beginning to unfold." Then came the bombing of Samarra, and a "vacuum" because of delays in the Iraqi political process -- at

which point the casualties and incidences "just skyrocketed." He recalls that many in his own party were "anxious to get out of Iraq" and "people in my own government who questioned whether or not it was possible to create the conditions so that we could fully succeed."

He felt the only way for the surge to be effective was a "process that [brought] people along." Making it more "rough" was the 2006 election, as he was "mindful of dropping decisions in the midst of the campaign . . . People don't want military decisions based on election cycles or what's coming up in elections."

Would it have been easier to just replace Saddam with another strongman? "Early on, I knew we were in an ideological conflict, and you don't win ideological conflicts by replacing one strongman with another. . . . And frankly, that's been a big shift in our foreign policy in the Middle East, which is -- and this is not a criticism of anybody, it's a recognition that presidents deal with the realities of the situation. But in the Cold War, to prevent communism from taking root in the Middle East, we promoted stability. Well, it just so happens that over time people became so resentful and so hateful that they were swayed by a group of very smart and very capable ideologues to become their foot soldiers."

He also counts as an accomplishment his protection of the homeland, in particular that he is "leaving behind tools that future presidents will be able to use -- and even though they were controversial when they were implemented, people are going to get in that Oval Office and say, now I understand why this tool is important."

He dismisses criticisms (some from this page) that his second-term foreign policy has been a shadow of his first -- that it has placed too high a premium on a diplomatic multilateralism that has allowed Iran to inch closer to a bomb and North Korea to play the world community. "A credible foreign policy is one in which you initially establish your credibility, establish your principles by which you would govern and stand strongly by them, so that over time, the people will begin to say -- in the world -- say, well, we can't change him, let's join him and try to solve problems."

Mr. Bush lists as an example the Palestinian issue, in which he refused "to deal with Arafat," but in which "the world came in many ways to recognize that policy made some sense" and "therefore the two-state solution led by a Palestinian Authority that recognized Israel has now come to be."

I ask the president how the Republican Party has changed these past eight years. What are the opportunities it has missed, or where has it grown?

Organizationally, he says the "Bush era for the Republican Party" will be remembered for its breakthrough work in 2000 and 2004 in "how to organize at the grass roots," the "micro-targeting, and a very intense focus on getting out votes" that Barack Obama built on this year with the Internet. Substantively, he acknowledges it is difficult to "assess where [the party] has grown after a defeat"

like the one it just received. He wishes he could say that one change "was the capacity to get Hispanic votes" -- as he did in 2004 -- but this election saw a Latino defection to Democrats.

Yet he remains a believer in the cyclical nature of politics, and his own stamp on the party. He says a younger generation will "take our philosophy, which is right of center -- compassionate conservatism is how I describe it -- and win." He doesn't believe change requires an ideological shift, but rather "new faces, new voices, fresh energy" that take "the same basic philosophy -- lower taxes, strong national defense, a belief in a responsibility era."

Speaking of compassionate conservatism, the GOP is in an internal dispute over the meaning of that term, a fight that could shape the future of the party. On one side are those who argue it is primarily a way of describing how conservative policies are, well, compassionate. On the other are those who argue it demands conservatives embrace bigger government.

So I ask the guy who invented the term to settle the fight. "Compassionate conservatism, first and foremost, says that people benefit from a conservative philosophy." Mr. Bush thinks government has a definite role, though with limits, and with a focus on effectiveness. "People want to say compassionate conservatism means -- right off the bat they say, more government spending. No. What I say is, when there's government spending, it is as a last resort, and it works, which is compassionate."

Today's trip is an emotional one to Texas A&M, where the president delivers his last commencement address, to a school that is home of the Bush School of Government and Public Service. He jumps out of the motorcade and greets his parents, flashing former First Lady Barbara Bush a grin and a "Hi, Ma!" Yet toward the end of his address he slightly chokes up delivering a tribute to his father as an "example of courage and service."

He admits he'll miss things, one of them "being commander in chief." One thing rarely mentioned about this president (and he does not bring it up to me) is that he has met with some 2,800 families who have lost loved ones in Afghanistan or Iraq. When I mention it, and how quietly he has performed these meetings, he simply responds that it was important they not be "political." He does say he'll miss doing it, because "it's always been a healing experience. The commander in chief -- the comforter in chief gets comforted. Why? Because the character of the American people is so strong . . ."

He is fired up about his library and institute that will be built at Southern Methodist University, which he says will be "a place to promote thought and values," in particular, freedom. He wants to have Middle East educators come "so that Americans don't have this image that there's nothing modern in the Middle East."

He muses it would be "cool" to bring Vaclav Havel to write a book, or Cuban dissident Oscar Biscet (should he get out of prison) to lecture. Domestically, he wants the center to focus on compassionate conservatism, and to promote

successful stories of "social entrepreneurship."

I ask the president what he's learned from his time in office -- not from a policy perspective, but as a person. His answer is unsurprising from a man who has always talked openly of his faith -- though that, too, has earned him criticism.

"I've learned that God is good. All the time."

Ms. Strassel writes the Journal's Potomac Watch column.

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