

The president in his own terms.

THE CASE FOR BUSH

By Richard Vigilante

Having spent almost four years being dissatisfied with George Bush, I am not surprised most Americans feel the same way. Still, the closer one looks, the clearer it becomes that Bush is one of those presidents to whom history will be very kind, especially if we let him finish his run. In the past four years he has quietly prepared the country for a brilliant turn of the century and perhaps for another American century beyond.

Bush is a much better president than politician. Unlike Reagan, who kept the electorate focused on a few crucial issues, Bush distracts voters by treating even the largest questions as accumulations of detail. He dislikes and is not very good at electoral politics, preferring to deal inside the Beltway rather than carry the fight to the people. And he is an orator in the great tradition of Stengel and Berra. As a result, he has governed almost in private.

Bush's uncommunicativeness is a personal flaw magnified by the political tradition to which he is heir. Bush is a conservative. But like Goldwater, Nixon, Eisenhower, and Rockefeller, he is a Roosevelt-era Republican, the last of a tradition of Republican leaders traumatized by the 1930s years and by the electorate's conviction that the Republicans not only caused the Great Depression but were too cold-blooded to do anything about it. These Republicans tended to be electoral pessimists, believing that while it was the great historic mission of their party to provide responsible government and keep Democrats from dissipating the nation's wealth and morals, the electorate was sure to punish them for fulfilling that mission.

In Bush's view, it is part of political life to be punished for doing right, which is why he has such a hard time running on his record. He is averse both to the "do anything as long as you are doing something" approach to government and to the idea that the agenda of good government should be superseded by bright new multipoint policy programs. Also in the Roosevelt-era mode, he tends to compensate by being good at negotiation and skillful behind closed doors.

Seen in this perspective, Bush's record makes far more sense. Take three areas: the economy, civil rights, and social policy. In all three, Bush is regarded as a failure because he has been neither a liberal nor a Reaganite. The opposite is the case. The economy is the most obvious example of this. Although the voters are mad at his apparently lethargic handling of a slump, and though he's said little to change their view, history will almost certainly

credit Bush as one of the two or three best economic presidents of the century. If we stay on course, the United States is almost certainly headed for a great turn-of-the-century boom and strong, steady growth for years beyond. The three great engines of the '90s expansion will be the final victory over the Great Inflation of the 1970s, the expansion of free trade, and the end of communism.

The general rap on Bush is that he has "done nothing about the recession." Good for him. The current slump is global, and the United States is actually doing better than most of the G-7. Most of the forces behind the slump are beyond the government's short-term control, and many will help the economy in the medium and long term: for example, not only did the Gulf crisis bring an oil shock, but as short wars do, it choked the economy rather than stimulated it. The breakup of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany have caused a temporary spike in interest rates. The Basel capital agreements caused a temporary tightening in the lending policies of major U.S. banks, but were also a milestone in the integration of the world banking system.

Under these circumstances the last thing we would have wanted was a president who would panic and start bullying the economy, pulling out all the stimulative stops to fake a recovery before the election. Bush has risked his second term to do the right thing. The Great Inflation, brought on by the dissolution of the Bretton Woods system, and only partly tamed by Reagan and Volcker, was fatally wounded by Bush-Greenspan. Inflation has been averaging around 3 percent. If we stay on course it will probably begin the final descent to 2, which economists count as roughly zero. Equally important, the market seems to believe it. Both short- and long-term nominal interest rates are at twenty-year lows or better; the market seems to be surrendering its anticipated inflation premium for long-term rates. Already, as Bear Stearns's chief economist and former OMB official Lawrence Kudlow points out, low inflation and interest rates are providing a sizable "monetary tax cut," lowering the cost of doing business, boosting assets, shrinking debt. The drop in mortgage interest rates alone has given home-owning families a "tax cut" of nearly \$30 billion a year.

Does Bush deserve the credit? Not all of it, of course; a great deal goes to Alan Greenspan. But presidents can either protect the Fed or frustrate it. Carter, ignorant, resentful, inexperienced, and desperate to be re-elected, packed Arthur Burns off to be ambassador to Germany and appointed the pliable G. William Miller, one of the worst chairmen in history, who revved up inflation into the double digits. Bush has done everything right. He reappointed Greenspan to another four-year term in the middle of the recession even after the chairman made it clear he was not going to sacrifice the fight against inflation to Bush's re-election. All presidents complain publicly about the Fed. But despite White House statements claiming (accurately) that the Fed was slowing the recovery, senior Fed officials say Bush has been more supportive of their austere policy than any president in memory. So why isn't Bush crowing about inflation? Well, Roosevelt-era Republicans think stopping inflation is one of the things they

were put on earth to do and then be punished for.

On trade, Bush's performance has been superb. Last year, when the administration made clear it was serious about using the Uruguay round of GATT to reduce world agricultural subsidies, it inspired hilarity among the Europeans and among American reporters, all of whom proclaimed that Bush was being an unrealistic dogmatist. The Uruguay agreement will not be perfect, but thanks to Bush's efforts, it will expand the market for U.S. food products (although sugar will be hurt) and save American consumers some \$30 billion a year in lower food prices. And American farm subsidies will be reduced; Uruguay is also a domestic budget-cutting tool.

If we re-elect Bush, he will bring Mexico into the North American Free Trade Agreement, something we might lose if Clinton's pandering to the Gephardt wing on trade lasts past November. Since Mexico joined GATT in 1986 and sharply reduced its trade barriers, U.S. exports to Mexico have doubled, and our trade deficit with Mexico has dropped substantially; excluding oil, we now run a surplus. If Mexico left the Third World, the economic and social benefits to the United States in the long run would be enormous. NAFTA is a big part of getting there, not only because of the increase in trade it will bring, but because it helps bond Mexico to the worldwide democratic capitalist renaissance.

In social and environmental legislation as on the economy, Bush has been pilloried—and misunderstood. Here again Bush's problems come not from ideology but from another misread aspect of his Roosevelt-era mentality. His keenness for negotiated settlements, in which one wins quietly, almost secretly, by getting the details right, inclines him to work with the Democratic Congress rather than dramatically go over its head to the people. But in the view of the Reaganites, working with Congress produced the great disasters of his first term: the budget deal and what the Bush people respectfully call "the legislative record"; the Clean Air Act amendments, the Civil Rights Bill, and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The conservatives are wrong twice over. First, they have to recognize that avoiding Congress is a romantic fantasy no working president can indulge in. Bush does not have as many votes in the House or as much control of the Senate as Reagan did. Given the numbers, the decision to hammer out the best possible bill and take some political losses rather than make the grand political gesture and end up with a worse bill and an override is not a bad one. Second, the conservatives have to recognize that the Bushites have actually won some critical battles in the details. They have devoted months of political energy to struggles over legislative wording, fighting to define the center and win its votes while preordaining an acceptable outcome when the legislation hits the courts.

The clearest vindication of Bush's strategy came in the two-year struggle over the Civil Rights Bill. Ultimately the administration won a clear victory against rigid racial preferences. The purpose of the Civil Rights Bill of 1990, the Kennedy-Hawkins bill, was to reverse the Supreme Court's 1989 *Wards Cove* decision. Before *Wards Cove* an employer without the right proportion of minorities in a

particular job could find himself on the defensive in court even if he clearly had not intended to discriminate. *Wards Cove* shifted most of the advantages to the employer, requiring the plaintiff to identify the specific employment practice that was causing the disparate impact, and to demonstrate that the practice was not excused by "business necessity."

Bush vetoed Kennedy-Hawkins and was upheld, but that was only the first act: there were more than enough votes to override a veto for a compromise bill perceived as moderate. Both sides set out on a long struggle to control the compromise, fighting for language that a majority of Congress would accept but that would go their way in court. On the day Bush signed, it was already clear the administration had won more than it lost. If, as the early returns suggest, the courts buy the administration's interpretation of most of the compromise language, the great civil rights lobby push to overturn *Wards Cove* was a bust (see "Discrimination Endgame" by Paul Gewirtz, *TNR*, August 12, 1991). There is also a big net improvement in the bill that had nothing to do with *Wards Cove*: it makes race norming of test scores illegal.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (which critics fear will overburden employers and landlords required to accommodate the handicapped) and the Clean Air Act amendments are variations on the same story: not quite enough votes, long fights over the details, particularly over adjudicable language, better-than-expected results. The amendments to the Clean Air Act, to which even the conservative Heritage Foundation gave "two cheers," introduce into federal statute for the first time market-oriented environmental strategies that conservatives have been advocating for years. Moreover Bush, who concedes he gave the regulatory agencies too much rope in his first two years, has promised to lighten the regulatory impact of both bills administratively.

On social policy, the Bush administration is being attacked by the right and the left, both of which argue that it has no social policy, except a usually damaging pragmatism. Reaganites attack anything that is not ideologically satisfying; and Clintonites charge do-nothingism. In these pages, Mickey Kaus recently claimed (see "Paradigm's Loss," July 27) that Bush New Paradigmers such as James Pinkerton and Jack Kemp are actually betraying the cause because Bush has done nothing to enact the New Paradigm while Clinton is a true believer.

In fact, it is probably the Clinton Paradigmers who are fooling themselves. Bush, who gave Pinkerton his position in the first place, and under whose aegis the movement was born (though many of the ideas were first tried under Reagan), is nursing the substance of the paradigm along very nicely.

Take school choice. Choice cannot be programmed from Washington. It is too dependent on local leadership. The best a president can give school choice is "bully pulpit plus," the plus being a modest financial incentive for state or local education authorities to move toward choice. It was Bush, Lamar Alexander, and a few top Bushies who made choice a serious national issue, not

only by talking about it and helping local choice leaders achieve national visibility, but by placing it on the administration's legislative agenda. The administration's G.I. Bill for Kids, for example, now before Congress, would attach \$1,000 per child to students in selected school districts that set up choice programs.

But effective school choice is an extremely difficult political goal. Like many New Paradigm projects, it requires declaring war on that vast bureaucratic postindustrial complex that dominates not only the educational and social welfare system but the Democratic Party. The administrators, the consultants, the NEA, the schools of education, lose everything under choice. Bush has the potential and the political base to see this through. There is every indication that he is committed to the decentralized imposition of the policy. In all likelihood, Clinton would be hobbled by the very Democratic interest groups school choice undermines.

Much the same story could be told of the rest of the agenda: tenant management and housing vouchers, which made some inroads under the Bush administration. Bush has made modest progress; Clinton will probably be politically incapacitated if he so much as tries. What's more, Bush (with the help of some progressive young Democrats) beat the bureaucratic ABC day care bill and instead increased the earned income tax credit to give working low-income families the single biggest boost in government aid in history. Even Clinton cites Kemp's ideas at HUD as model New Paradigm proposals. All of them would be

stymied by the influx of standard-issue Democrats into the middle and upper echelons of the bureaucracy.

In all of these areas—economic policy, domestic legislation, civil rights, and education—a clear argument can be made for Bush's presidency: for his courage, for his attendance to the details of government rather than the dictates of politics, and for his tangible experimentation with new models of government.

Bush is called a caretaker president, and that is meant as criticism, or at best a left-handed compliment, a synonym for lethargy or lack of imagination, a man suited only to quiet times. That's all wrong. Precisely because these are not quiet times, we need someone like Bush. America has been dealt a rich but complicated hand; for all the talk about the urgent needs for bold, new policies, what we really need to do now is play out that hand without messing up. We need strength of character more than policy papers. We need someone who cares about making the right choice even when the country may not credit him for it because the choices are complicated and obscure and difficult to explain in a sound bite. We need someone who expects virtue to be its own reward, a man who cares more about doing just right, the tasks history hands him than about putting his own mark on all he sees. It is a time remarkably well-suited to Bush. He has done well; we should let him finish.

RICHARD VIGILANTE is writing a book about the *New York Daily News* strike and the future of American labor.

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