

George W. Bush Receives a Character Award at West Point: Duty, Honor, Atrocity

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In George W. Bush's home state of Texas, if you are an ordinary citizen found guilty of capital murder, the mandatory sentence is either life in prison or the death penalty. If, however, you are a former president of the United States responsible for initiating two illegal wars of aggression, which killed [7,000 U.S. servicemen](#) and at least [210,000 civilians](#), displaced more than [10 million people](#) from their homes, condoned torture, initiated a global drone assassination campaign, and imprisoned people for years without substantive evidence or trial in Guantanamo Bay, the punishment evidently is to be given the Thayer Award at West Point.

On October 19th, George W. Bush traveled to the United States Military Academy, my *alma mater*, to receive the [Sylvanus Thayer Award](#) at a ceremony hosted by that school's current superintendent and presented on behalf of the West Point Association of Graduates. The honor is "given to a citizen... whose outstanding character, accomplishments, and stature in the civilian community draw wholesome comparison to the qualities for which West Point strives."

The Thayer may be one of the most important awards that hardly anyone has ever heard of. In a sense, it's a litmus test when it comes to West Point's moral orientation and institutional values. Academy graduates around the world — in dusty GP medium tents as well as Pentagon offices — all sit at the proverbial table where momentous, sometimes perverse decisions are regularly made. To invade or not to invade, to bomb or not to bomb, to torture, or not to torture — those are the questions. As the Trump era has [reminded us](#), the U.S. military's ability to obliterate all organized human life on Earth is beyond question. So it stands to reason that the types of beliefs pounded into cadets at West Point — the ones that will serve to guide them throughout their military careers — do matter. To the classes of cadets now there, this award will offer a message: that George W. Bush and the things he did in his presidency are worth emulating. I could not disagree more.

The United States Military Academy is, or at least should be, a steward of American military values and yet the presentation of the Thayer Award to our former president represents an unprincipled lapse in judgment. In what it condones, it has committed a brazen violation of West Point's [honor code](#), which instructs that "a cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do."

George W. Bush [deceived the nation](#), cheated noncombatants of both their bodily autonomy and moral significance, and waged unjustifiable, unnecessary wars, which misallocated

trillions of dollars that would have been better used to ensure the prosperity and well-being of Americans. And he once described his messianic mission as "[this crusade](#)." Is the world's premier military academy not then honoring the dishonorable?

As I recall from my time wearing cadet grey, West Point regularly indulged in talk about doing "the harder right rather than the easier wrong," about exhibiting "moral courage," and about "[Army Values](#)." Our ethical compass was given to us, standard issue, early on, often in the form of quaint military parables.

These were meant to set the ethical standards for behavior in war. Despite serious transgressions of those values by West Point graduates in these years, I still believe that the majority of West Pointers, even in the most stressful situations, are challenged by a nagging little voice asking what West Point would do. In a sense, we have all been hard-wired to follow the ethical protocols we learned at the academy. As far as I'm concerned, however, this award shifts the goal posts. It establishes a new moral paradigm for what should be considered acceptable behavior in war and foreign policy.

As someone who also fought in one of those wars, let me just say that presenting Bush's legacy as a template for cadets to follow is — not to mince words — a moral obscenity. Once the collective "we" — that is, West Point and its alumni — acknowledge that Bush's wars and the state-sanctioned torture that went with them are not just acceptable, but laudable, we have lost any plausible claim to the moral high ground, the ground I once believed West Point was founded on.

Now that the Thayer Award has been given to former President Bush and we, the alumni, have even officially sponsored the act (not me, of course), it seems that the values we were taught don't stand for anything at all.

A Cadet Will Not Lie

By idolizing Bush, a man whose major legacy is defined by acts of state terrorism (rebranded "counterterrorism"), West Point and its alumni have canonized by association his now-16-year-old war on terror. West Pointers have long been placed in a precarious position in relation to that war, simultaneously helping to perpetrate it and suffering from it. Too much energy has been devoted to pursuing it and too much lost for it not to have some grand meaning. By retrofitting the past, West Point and its graduates are now attempting to lessen the sting of, the reality of, those last 16 years. In the process, they are continuing to delude its graduates, who are still being deployed to commit political violence in, at best, a morally dubious set of wars.

The very act of misleading a generation of salt-of-the-earth people — as most West Pointers I've encountered are — making them willing participants (and I include myself in this) in Bush's supreme international crime should qualify as a tragedy. Convincing cadets of Bush's widely discredited, false narrative is also a lie by West Point's own doctrinal definition of the word. The academy's honor code [defines lying](#) as "an untruth or... the telling of a partial truth and the vague or ambiguous use of information or language with the intent to deceive or mislead..."

West Point generally doesn't teach those facts that would cause cadets to feel embarrassed by or skeptical of the state. During wars of aggression like Bush's, cadets will never be permitted to come to the conclusion that the political violence they will be sent off to

commit after graduation is illegal or morally unsavory. Acknowledging all the emotive connotations that come with the word, one could still credibly call this practice [“brainwashing.”](#)

At West Point, it’s still possible to believe that we are fighting in the interests of the Afghan people when, for 16 years, a coalition of the most powerful armies on Earth led by the United States — supposedly with the support of most Afghans — hasn’t been able to get rid of a few thousand ragtag Taliban fighters. Why is it that, at the academy, the contradictoriness of such claims never leads to an inconvenient but possibly more reasonable explanation: that we’ve failed because enough of them oppose us, that we’re part of the problem, not the solution? In his final address to the Afghan parliament in 2014, President Hamid Karzai suggested as much, claiming that the last 12 years of war had been [“imposed”](#) on Afghanistan.

The extreme psychosocial dynamics of West Point make it a masterful teacher of such Orwellian [“doublethink.”](#) In the process, people like Bush — or former National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (another Thayer Award recipient) — are deified. They must exist as role models, not villains or war criminals. Being sure that the enemy is the enemy is an imperative of combat, so it’s essential that no one thinks about this topic too much or too deeply.

Inconvenient facts are deliberately omitted as threats to both recruitment and retention. Blind devotion is considered a virtue. Cadets are trained to proverbially place all their self-esteem eggs in the military basket. Morality is partitioned. Emphasis is put on individual actions in combat, not the morality of the war being fought. We were typically taught that, a few bad apples aside, throughout its history the United States has always been “the good guy,” never the perpetrator.

In direct combat in Afghanistan, my soldiers and I faced death, disability, and despair. But perhaps the deepest wound was coming to realize that such tragedies were in service to, at best, a quixotic cause and, at worst, political expediency.

Due to an overriding obligation to the state and a purely subordinate obligation to the truth, West Point is structurally incapable of adhering to its own honor code in practice. Dishonesty, however, has a subtler aspect to it. It leeches away whatever integrity the academy does possess beneath its granite foundation. In that sense, the latest Thayer Award is an attempt to revise history by denying the [illegality](#) of Bush’s wars and absolving him of any accountability for them.



Lest we forget: none of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were Iraqi or Afghan citizens, nor did Iraq's autocratic ruler have nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction, nor was he in any way involved with al-Qaeda. Instead, as revealed in the leaked [Downing Street Memo](#), President Bush "wanted to remove Saddam, through military action... [T]he intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy." Meanwhile, his top officials continued to [publicly push](#) the lie that Iraq "possesses and produces chemical weapons," as well as supposed evidence (fraudulent, as they knew at the time) indicating that Iraq was "reconstituting its nuclear weapons program." This claim would be explicitly contradicted by the U.S. intelligence community's prewar [National Intelligence Estimate](#), which stated that Saddam Hussein's regime did not have "sufficient material" to manufacture any nuclear weapons and that "the information we have on Iraqi nuclear personnel does not appear consistent with a coherent effort to reconstitute a nuclear weapons program." The very justification for Bush's invasion and occupation of that country, in other words, was built upon [lies](#). This year's Thayer Award is simply a concrete manifestation of those lies.

To former President Bush, I'd like to say: there is no betrayal more intimate than being sent to kill or die unnecessarily by your own countrymen.

... Cheat

Whatever one thinks about soldiers invading another country or the people who defend that country from those foreign aggressors, this year's Thayer Award cheats the far more numerous victims of those wars, Iraqi and Afghan civilians, of their status as human beings. To give this award to Bush is to say that their lives didn't matter, that they got what they deserved. Or as soldiers I came across liked to say, often with high-wattage smiles, "We freed the shit out of them."

Osama bin Laden was connected to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians, George W. Bush to hundreds of thousands ([at least 70 September 11ths](#)), not to speak of the unrecorded torments of millions. One can only argue that Bush's invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were less of a crime if Iraqi and Afghan noncombatants are counted as fractional human beings — if, that is, there is one set of rules for America and another, heavily enforced by the U.S. military, for the rest of the world. By any elementary definition, this is "cheating."

It should be self-evident that the use of [torture](#) is a dishonorable thing. What then could be a worse crime than for a leader of a democracy to [organize](#) the state-sanctioned torture of both the innocent and the guilty on a large scale? The very act of torture cheats people of their bodily autonomy. When West Point overlooks the hypocrisy of giving an award for "outstanding character" to a former leader who put his stamp of approval on torture — for which the U.S. once [punished](#) Japanese war criminals with hanging or lengthy prison sentences — it makes a mockery of those values. The International Criminal Court [reported](#) that, under the Bush-era torture program, members of the U.S. Army and the CIA may be guilty of war crimes. Former National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism Richard Clarke went further, saying, "It's clear that some of the things [the Bush administration] did were war crimes."

Think of this Thayer Award, then, as an undeserved rehabilitation of George W. Bush's reputation that's meant to cheat history. Put another way, West Point supports giving the former president this award not because he earned it, but because they wish he had.

... Steal

It's hard to find a time in American history when more was spent to accomplish less. Even on the most practical level, the spread of terror groups and insurgencies of various kinds continues to outpace the rate at which the U.S. can kill the latest "bad guys." The entire war is, in the long run and to the tune of trillions of taxpayer dollars, unsustainable. It's only a question of how much damage we want to do to our own soldiers, how much public funding we intend to divert, while destroying the social fabric of other countries, before we pack it up and leave.



At the start of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush ordered the U.S. military to conduct a devastating aerial assault on Baghdad, known as "shock and awe." (Source: Consortiumnews)

What did Bush, or any of us, get from stealing sovereignty from the people of Iraq and Afghanistan? Global terrorism deaths increased [4,000%](#) from 2002 to 2014 (from 725 to 32,727). The Taliban now hold [more ground](#) in Afghanistan than at any point since the invasion of 2001. TSA airport screenings fail to detect mock weapons in [95%](#) of tests. The U.S.-friendly client regime established in Iraq [looted](#) billions of dollars in American aid. And that's just to start down a long, long list. As journalist Patrick Cockburn [wrote](#), "The invasion and occupation of Iraq by the U.S.... destroyed Iraq as a united country and nobody has been able to put it back together again. It opened up a period when Iraq's three great communities — Shia, Sunni and Kurds — are in a permanent state of confrontation, a situation that has had a deeply destabilising impact on all of Iraq's neighbours."

Bush leveraged the future prosperity of America into trillions of dollars of debt, an intergenerational heist meant to give him the appearance of being "tough on terror." That's a reality that should be unappealing to members of both political parties. For fiscally conservative Republicans, it bloats the budget; for Democrats, it diverts precious funding that might otherwise have gone into crucial social programs. In short, the honored former president stole from American citizens a chance to deal adequately with climate change, infrastructure needs, education, and healthcare.

And it's difficult to discuss stealing without recalling Bush's [illegal mass surveillance program](#). It's hard to imagine how spying on one's own citizens without a warrant could be emblematic of what the Thayer Award stands for.

... Or Tolerate Those Who Do

When cadets, soldiers, and other servicemen swear an oath, they trust that the president will be guided by sound principles. By sending us to fight his bogus war on terror, George W. Bush betrayed that commitment. In giving the Thayer Award to him, West Point and its graduates not only put their stamp of approval on a president who broke with their stated values, they glorified and cleansed him. This award, in Dubya's hands, is distinctly stolen valor.

There are many Americans who exemplify the very best of what our country — and West Point — could be. As graduates of the academy, none of us should have difficulty finding deserving Thayer Award recipients. George W. Bush's terror wars, however, were not just a tragedy but also a crime. It's now a secondary tragedy that West Point lacked both the honor and conviction to say so.

The former president deserves a cold metal bench in a stockade awaiting trial, not an award and a warm round of applause from the academy. No coffee table books featuring his [paintings](#) — a perverse form of macabre exhibitionism — will atone for his actions. If West Point and its Association of Graduates want to maintain any credible pretense of adhering to the values they claim to espouse, they should revoke the most recent Thayer Award immediately.

Erik Edstrom is a graduate of the West Point class of 2007. He was an infantry officer, Army Ranger, and Bronze Star Medal recipient who deployed to direct combat in Afghanistan.

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