

Pandemic Revisionism: The George W. Bush Whitewash

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Theme: [History](#)

“Our enemies are innovative and resourceful. And so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people. And neither do we.” – President George W. Bush, Aug. 5, 2004

Hatred is disorientating, and becomes, over time, a form of enduring fanaticism. The attacks on US President Donald Trump tend to fall into this camp. Much criticism of his often grotesque conduct, from his conversion of high office to a social media spectacle of grabs and interruptions, to his whole lowering of the tone, is warranted. He has brought locker room morals and the ethics of the US corporate boardroom to the White House. In the annals of the US presidency, he will not favour well, but nor should he necessarily be seen as a singular catastrophe. There are other worthier contenders for the court historians to consider.

One of them must be George W. Bush who, true to his misspoken words, never stopped thinking about new ways of harming the US and its people. This was a president who declared with confidence that there could be such things as an “Axis of Evil” in international relations; that the map of the Middle East needed to be rewritten in blood – yet again – on an adventurist, schoolboy hunch; and proclaimed a Global War on Terror with a sort of mad glee that [tolerated](#) an extra-judicial culture of torture, renditions and CIA black sites. “My blood was boiling,” he writes in that painful, and for the most part hopelessly unreliable read [Decision Points](#). “We were going to find out who did this, and kick their ass.” This was not a quest marked by the need for sound evidence, be it Saddam Hussein’s fictitious weapons of mass destruction, or forged links between Baghdad and al-Qaeda. When destroying a country, stubborn motivation can resist the evidentiary brief.

Domestically, Bush’s tenure oversaw a bloating of the national security state, fattened by inefficient and intrusive surveillance coupled with the use of imperial styled powers that disparaged the workings of Congress. Air pollution standards were reduced; logging of wilderness areas encouraged and naff intrusions of religion into policy witnessed.

In responding to Hurricane Katrina, one of the most devastating natural events in US history, the president distinguished himself by [continuing his vacation](#) at his expansive Prairie Chapel Ranch in Crawford, Texas before cutting it short. Once committed in response, he could never dispel the image of detachment from the catastrophe. Praising the bungling performance of the Federal Emergency Management Agency director Michael Brown (“you’re doing a heck of a job”) did not help.

At the helm of the US imperium for eight years was a person of questionable cognitive heft and permanent frat boy immaturity, who had an entertainingly defective [grasp of language](#)

(entrepreneur not being a French word; underestimated, and all that) and a tenuous hold on reality. During his time in office, dark forces led by Vice President Dick Cheney pulled strings and encouraged this *manqué* president. A sense of the impression he left on the United States could be gathered by the fact that the country got its first black president, elected not for being necessarily irresistible in offering small change but for not being Bush.

In retirement, he has been treated as a harmlessly mild, doddery recluse, dedicated to peaceful pursuits, such as painting. Along with his wife Laura, they are sharing what they have [described](#) as “the afterlife in their promised land in Texas”.

From this world of the afterlife, Bush has suddenly piped up. The deaths and suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were just too much for him to ignore. In [a video posted](#) by the George W. Bush Presidential Centre, the credentials of sainthood and leadership were offered to rolling images of the United States. “We are not partisan combatants.” Pieties aplenty choke the performance. “We are human beings, equally vulnerable and equally wonderful in the sight of God. We rise or fall together, and we are determined to rise.” He noted that Americans need to “be compassionate” and “creative in our outreach”. Remember to show empathy and kindness, those “essential, powerful tools of national recovery.”

The response to this sop-filled intervention by Bush has been one of reputational restoration. They have come from the usual circles: starry-eyed thespians and celebrities, many of them centrist or slightly tilted to the left of politics; many, if not Democrats then those with Democratic allegiances. Andy Worthington [had already detected](#) this trend in 2018. Trump’s place in the White House had caused many to lose their heads, with “a bizarre propensity, on the part of those in the centre and on the left of US political life, to seek to rehabilitate the previous Republican president, George W. Bush.” They [ranged](#) from the former First Lady, Michelle Obama (“a beautiful, funny, kind, sweet man”) to talk show host Ellen DeGeneres, [who, last year, kept company](#) with the Bushes at a sporting fixture. “Just because I don’t agree with someone on everything doesn’t mean I’m not going to be friends with them.” Best forget what he did.

The COVID-19 video performance has induced another round of emetic showering. Debora Messing, for one, gushed at the show. “A REAL president,” [she tweeted](#). Former Democratic Congresswoman Katie Hill [exercised](#) her tear ducts. “In a million years I never thought I’d be crying watching this, thinking how much better we’d all feel if Bush were president today.” Historian Seth Kotlar [was captured](#) by “nostalgia”, not necessarily for Bush “but for Presidents who genuinely tried to speak to the entire nation, not just a part of it.”

Trump preferred a different reaction and predictable focus: himself. Bush, [he fumed](#), “was nowhere to be found in speaking up against the greatest Hoax in American history.” That little matter called the impeachment proceedings still rankles. But Bush, it seems, continues to slide into that place of history where minds atrophy and hagiography quells reality.

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