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The Presidency of George W. Bush: A First Historical Assessment, ed. Julian E. Zelizer

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Julian E. Zelizer (ed.), *The Presidency of George W. Bush: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, £29.95). Pp. 386. ISBN 978 0 691 14901 1.

Instant history, as the editor and authors of this fine book note, is always tenuous and problematic. In spite of today's information revolution, there remains so much that is at this time unknown, so many memoirs yet to be written, presidential papers yet to be combed through, archival materials to be examined, oral histories to be recorded, and, perhaps most importantly, long-term consequences of policy yet to be determined, that we will not unfold the mysteries of the Bush presidency until years to come. Normally, it takes anywhere from one to two decades before the passions and emotions recede, and cold analysis and evaluation can take place. And with the presidency of George W. Bush, emotions still run high. He was a controversial, yet consequential, President who mattered.

Yet, in spite of these obvious and important drawbacks, the hunger for judgment and understanding looms irresistible. This is especially true of the Presidents who mattered most, the consequential Presidents who were agents of change. And love him or loathe him, for better or for worse, George W. Bush was just such a President.

Preliminary though these assessments may be, they serve as an important framing of the key concerns surrounding the presidency of George W. Bush. Many of the focal points of these chapters will remain the basis for judging the Bush presidency in future years.

In some ways, this book is as much an intellectual history of the evolution of modern conservatism in America as it is an assessment of the Bush presidency itself. Zelizer, who has elsewhere written quite perceptively about the emergence of Big Government/Big Presidency conservatism, once again confronts this seeming paradox of small-government advocates who harbor suspicions of central executive authority (see the 1950s and 1960s writings of Walter Dean Burnham and Alfred de Grazia, the early *National Review* writings of William F. Buckley, and the more recent scholarship by Gene Healy) evolving – or devolving – into defenders of the big state and a big presidency. Noting that “the exercise of presidential power became one of the defining characteristics of Bush's administration” (6), Zelizer goes on to contextualize this when he writes, “Within every policy area, Bush struggled with the central quandary of conservatism in the twenty-first century: what were the challenges conservatives faced, now that they had become the governing establishment?” (p. 7).

It was one thing to rail against executive power when you were on the outside looking in, but what happens when the keys to the kingdom fall into your hands? Zelizer (and the chapter written by May L. Dudziak) points to the obvious problem of small-government advocates, falling in love with executive power once they had control of the executive branch. Traditional conservative principles were abandoned as nominal conservatives were seduced by the lure of presidential power. This, according to Zelizer, led to a recalibration of the meaning of conservatism:

The history of the Bush presidency marked the culmination of the second stage in the history of modern conservatism, a period that began in the early 1980s when conservatives switched

from being an oppositional force in national politics to struggling with the challenges of governance that came from holding power. (p. 7)

It all, according to Zelizer, started with Ronald Reagan. In the Reagan years, “federal spending increased significantly” (9) and “the number of federal employees *expanded* to 3.1 million from 2.9 million when Reagan was in office” (9, emphasis in original). Zelizer could cite many more examples of the rise of big-government conservatism under Reagan but does not belabor the point.

In her excellent chapter, Mary L. Dudziak of the University of Southern California focusses on “departures from the rule of law” (39) to make her case that for the Bush administration “law was both a sword and a shield: it was a tool used to further some conservative objectives, and it was a shield intended to protect executive autonomy” (40). Dudziak does an fine job of explaining how the convenient use (and, many argue, abuse) of the concepts of a “unitary executive” became the fig leaf for arguing that in many areas “the president could act alone” (43), unencumbered by statute or the constraints of the separation of powers.

Central to the critique of Bush policymaking is the argument presented by David Greenberg of Rutgers University. In his chapter, “Creating Their Own Reality,” Greenberg contrasts Bush faith-based (my term) decision-making with “reality-based” (his term) decision-making. Regarding the administration’s “contempt for scientific and professional expertise,”

As never before, administration officials and their allies in politics and the news media openly disregarded the empirically grounded evidence, open-minded inquiry, and expert authority that had long underpinned governmental policymaking. Such politicization was hardly unknown in the past, but what had been aberrations now became standard practice. And to justify its disregard for expertise, the Right under Bush found itself promoting a view of knowledge in which any political claim, no matter how objectively verifiable or falsifiable, was treated as simply one of two competing descriptions of reality, with power and ideology, not science or disciplined inquiry, as the arbiters. (200–1)

This “radical epistemological relativism” (203) allowed the administration to dismiss science and embrace ideology or faith in decision-making.

Other chapters focus on the war on terror, Iraq as the “unnecessary war,” Bush’s transformative economic policies as he abandoned free-market capitalism after the economic collapse during the waning days of his presidency, energy policy, social policy, the role of religion, and efforts to lure minorities into the Karl Rove scheme to develop a new Republican coalition. The book concludes with Michael Kazin’s “From Hubris to Despair,” where Kazin of Georgetown University argues that in the end Bush has done considerable damage to the conservative movement.

Early though this assessment may be, this excellent and thought-provoking book is likely to have a lasting impact on how we view the controversial and consequential presidency of George W. Bush. Zelizer has provided the reader with a serious, thoughtful, and challenging early look at the Bush presidency and its likely legacy.