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## ESTABLISHMENT CONSERVATIVE

### The Presidency of George W. Bush

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FOLLOWING THE TRAGIC EVENTS OF 9/11, WHEN AL QAEDA TERRORISTS crashed three airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Americans turned their frightened eyes toward George W. Bush to see just what kind of president he would be.

Most people weren't sure what they would find. The new president was still hard to define. His campaign in 2000 had sent mixed signals on a variety of issues. Bush, the son of former president George H. W. Bush (1989–93), had run as a “compassionate conservative” who understood that in certain areas the federal government was necessary. He assured supporters he would use the power of the federal government to ameliorate problems such as inadequate primary education programs. “Big government is not the answer,” Bush told Republicans at his acceptance speech at the Philadelphia convention. “But the alternative to bureaucracy is not indifference. It is to put conservative values and conservative ideas into the thick of the fight for justice and opportunity.”

At the same time, Bush remained loyal to the Reagan Revolution by assuring voters he would pursue tax cuts, deregulation, and reduced spending. He was determined to avoid the fate of his father, who had accepted a tax increase in 1990, contradicting his famous campaign pledge, “Read my lips: no new taxes,” and had thus alienated conservatives from his administration. On foreign policy, Bush

criticized President Bill Clinton and his opponent, Vice President Al Gore Jr., for having deployed troops on international peace-keeping missions that were not vital to the national interest. Yet at the same time, Bush called for a tougher posture against rogue states such as Iraq and North Korea and supported increased funding for the Pentagon.

Further complicating Bush's presidency was the fact that he had been elected in an extraordinarily close and contested election. Problems with the ballots in Florida had resulted in a recount, court battles, and a controversial Supreme Court decision in December in *Bush v. Gore* that was needed to cement his victory. As a result, some Americans did not accept his presidency as legitimate, feeling that the election had literally been stolen from Gore. Many others who accepted the outcome of the judicial process, including some Republicans, remained skeptical that Bush had the skills and gravitas to succeed.

In his first few months in the White House, Bush did not fully reveal what his agenda would be. In some cases he appeared to be exactly the conservative that the right wing had hoped for. The president started his term with an executive order that weakened clean water standards. He then pushed a regressive tax cut through Congress by employing a highly partisan strategy. Pleasing the right wing of the GOP, Bush announced in August that he was sharply curtailing embryonic stem-cell research. But the administration was not entirely predictable. In his first year, Bush worked with Senate Democrats to enact the No Child Left Behind law, legislation that extended the role of the federal government in education. Bush also made a number of high-level cabinet appointments of African Americans and Latino Americans, moves that Gary Gerstle in chapter eleven demonstrates reflected a genuine commitment to pursue ethnic and racial diversity.

Nor was there a clear trajectory on foreign policy before 9/11. The administration had rejected multilateralism when it aggressively pushed to reinvigorate the missile shield program and withdrew from several international agreements. Bush talked tough against the Chinese government but walked away from a military

confrontation after the Chinese captured a downed U.S. spy plane and the pilots on board.

While questions about Bush's core agenda lingered throughout his eight years in the White House, what did become clear, to the surprise of many of his opponents, was that the administration developed four relatively coherent objectives, some of which they arrived in Washington ready to pursue and others that evolved only after they had control of the White House and lived through the crisis of 9/11, in an effort to bring to fruition the battles conservatives had been waging since the 1940s.

The administration's first objective was to craft federal policies that facilitated the economic and demographic shift that had been taking place since the 1970s, with the transfer of economic and political power to the service-, high-tech-, and oil-based economic sectors of the Sun Belt. The shift in power had been occurring over several decades as the South and Southwest experienced sizable increases in population and surging economic growth. Southern states, boasting of their nonunionized workforces and low tax rates, had worked hard to entice businesses through tax incentives and direct economic subsidies. Workers moving to this region left behind stagnant economies in the Northeast and Midwest. Retirees moved to these low-tax states because air conditioning made living conditions more tolerable.<sup>1</sup>

As Nelson Lichtenstein and Meg Jacobs show in their respective chapters, Bush's election had depended on the growing influence of these states, as they were populated by voters who formed the electoral base of the modern Republican Party and were key to his electoral success. A number of Bush's domestic policies would benefit the economic interests of these states. According to Lichtenstein, for instance, the Department of Labor agreed to a request from Wal-Mart to provide fifteen days' advance notice before it would investigate allegations of child labor standards violations. With Republican control of the White House and Congress after the 2002 midterm elections, the president had the political muscle he needed to pursue policies that were beneficial to the nonunionized, low-wage, low-priced Wal-Mart economy.

The second, related objective of the Bush presidency was to accelerate progress on the twin policy goals of deregulating industry and instating tax reductions that had been central to the conservative agenda to weaken the capacity of the federal government and unleash market activity. The administration relied on executive authority to relax workplace as well as environmental regulations. The impact of the supply-side economics revolution of the 1980s on the administration's agenda was quite powerful, James T. Patterson argues in chapter six. By constraining the role of the government in the workplace and lowering the tax burden for upper-middle-class and higher Americans, Bush sought to weaken the fiscal standing of the Treasury and to roll back those areas of government that were most vulnerable politically. He also wanted to distribute government benefits, through tax cuts, to wealthy Americans, who constituted a core component of the Republican coalition. Bush also continued the practice, used by Republican presidents Richard Nixon and then Ronald Reagan, of filling important bureaucratic positions with politically motivated administrators who were unsympathetic to the programs they managed.

The third objective was to aggressively pursue the use of executive-centered national security programs that conservatives had championed since Vietnam. Republicans had pushed for expansive intelligence investigations at home and unilateral, targeted military operations abroad that flexed America's military muscle without overcommitting U.S. forces. Though this was all on their agenda upon winning office, the attacks of September 11, 2001, dramatically intensified their drive to see these policies enacted into law and caused the president to expand his reach into areas such as nation building with the war in Iraq. They undertook a radical expansion of interrogation techniques, including the use of torture, that broke with national precedent and circumvented international accords on the treatment of detainees. Timothy Naf-tali in chapter four and Fredrik Logevall in chapter five recount the broader strategic shift that took place during this presidency through the response to the events of 9/11.

Like Reagan and his father before him, however, Bush learned he was still operating in the shadow of Vietnam. Americans were unwilling to tolerate high numbers of casualties, would not accept the restoration of the draft, and were leery of the government's violating civil liberties in pursuit of enemies. But within that framework, as a result of 9/11, George W. Bush pushed for more expansive national security operations than his Republican predecessors had in the 1980s and 1990s.

The final objective was the boldest of all: to construct a governing Republican coalition that was comparable in strength to what Democrats had achieved after 1932. Bush's strategy for achieving this coalition, however, moved in contradictory directions. The contributors to this book reveal a tension at the heart of this coalition-building operation. On the one hand, following the Republican Party's failure to build a broad coalition in the 2000 election, there were numerous moments when the administration focused on building a coalition of the willing by ignoring moderates and focusing on policies that, as political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson said, were "off-center."<sup>2</sup> The goal was to remake politics by governing with slim majorities and energizing activists on the right of the political spectrum, who voted at higher rates than the rest of the population, through symbolic issues such as attacks on liberal institutions and cultural values. In the short term, winning over moderates or Democrats was not the most efficient way to go, according to this strategy. By winning with slim margins in congressional and presidential elections, Republicans could maintain control and have the strength in numbers to remake government.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, there is substantial evidence that at other moments the administration did seek a more traditional "big tent" approach, as Bush's team had originally sought in the 2000 campaign. Most important, following the traumatic events of 9/11, what came to be called the war on terrorism had the potential to bring sizable segments of the population, including some Democrats, into the Republican fold. Bush also pushed for domestic programs that benefited broad portions of the population, not just

the base, including the No Child Left Behind provisions and Medicare prescription drug benefits, the largest expansion of Medicare since its creation in 1965 (to this list should be added his failed attempt to liberalize immigration laws). A potential Republican coalition, according to Bush's political guru Karl Rove, would be rooted in noncoastal states while securing the Republican base to include voting blocs traditionally thought Democratic, from working-class white voters in the industrial sectors of the Midwest (who had already been tempted by Reagan's GOP in the 1980s) to new immigrants in the Southwest, such as Hispanics. After the narrow 2000 election victory, Rove said, "I look at this time as 1896, the time where we saw the rise of William McKinley and his vice president, Teddy Roosevelt. . . . That was the last time we had a shift in political paradigm." Gary Gerstle, Kevin M. Kruse, and Michael Kazin in their chapters all explore the ambitions and frustrations involved in these efforts to capitalize on a divided, red/blue America.

In pursuing all four objectives, the exercise of presidential power became one of the defining characteristics of Bush's administration, as Mary L. Dudziak and I show in our respective chapters. The expanding authority of the executive branch was a primary objective of President Bush and Vice President Cheney since the day they took office in January 2001. While continuing the trend that had been evident since the Progressive Era, they moved more aggressively in scale and scope than any of their immediate predecessors. The Bush administration formed in direct conversation with the 1970s. This was a decade when many members of the administration came of professional age, several working in Richard Nixon's and Gerald Ford's White House, as they watched an assertive Congress respond to Watergate by revitalizing legislative power through the War Powers Act of 1973, the Budget Reform Act of 1974, and the creation of national surveillance regulations and the Office of the Independent Counsel in 1978. Conservatives came to see presidential power, grounded in a distinct interpretation of the law, as the best available tool for combating the liberals who dominated Congress and federal agencies. Bush would spend

an enormous amount of political energy, before and after 9/11, trying to vest more power in his office. The administration constantly privileged voices from the executive branch over other realms of society, tapping into traditions such as anti-intellectualism, as David Greenberg argues in chapter nine, to discredit individuals and organizations that opposed their policies.

The contributors to this book seek to evaluate Bush's presidency as he set out to accomplish these four objectives. To do so, they place Bush's presidency in a broader historical context, trying to discern what he was responsible for changing and when his administration was shaped by broader historical forces that had been developing for many years.

## THE BUSH PRESIDENCY AND THE HISTORY OF CONSERVATISM

Throughout the essays, the authors find that one theme shaped George W. Bush's time in the White House. 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?

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.<sup>4</sup> Between the 1940s and the 1970s, conservatives had concentrated on trying to build a political movement. Conservatism consisted of a number of different factions, none of which sat very comfortably alongside any other. The factions depended on the theme of anti-communism and other common enemies, such as the Great Society, to create some semblance of a movement. The Religious Right harnessed the energy of evangelical leaders and churchgoers around issues such as the tax treatment of private religious schools and representations of sexuality in popular culture. Business leaders fought for tax reductions and economic deregulation. Liber-

tarians championed the virtues of individual freedom and markets over the state. Neoconservative intellectuals and policymakers warned about the unintended consequences of Great Society programs, as well as the need to take a more aggressive military stand toward international communism. A small faction of extremist organizations explicitly played off racial animosity and fears about feminism to try to persuade former working-class Democrats into the Republican camp by fomenting a backlash against the civil rights laws from the 1960s.

In the first stage of this history, conservatives focused on building organizations, nurturing activist networks, and developing a financial infrastructure capable of challenging Democrats and liberalism. Conservatives formed political action committees, volunteer operations, radio talk shows, think tanks, and direct mail networks that facilitated the transmission of ideas and electing candidates.<sup>5</sup> They tried to create a movement, and they were successful.

The second stage in the history of conservatism started around 1980, with the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, and continued through 2008, when Republicans lost control of both branches of government and found themselves facing an internal crisis of leadership. During this period in the evolution of conservatism, Republicans struggled with the challenges that emanated from the process of governance.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, conservative Republicans enjoyed a number of important victories. There was, for example, the dismantling of economic regulatory programs that had been put into place during the Progressive Era and the New Deal. President Reagan also obtained congressional support for a historic tax cut in 1981 that weakened the fiscal strength of the American government, as President George W. Bush in his turn would do in 2001. By failing to update programs such as the minimum wage law, conservatives were able to diminish the value of the benefits.<sup>7</sup> Finally, unions, the heart of the New Deal coalition, continued to see their power decline, partially as a result of public policies unfavorable to labor.

From the moment Reagan started his presidency, conservatives



also learned about the difficult compromises they would have to make because of the continued power of liberal policies, politicians, and activists in the post-1960s period. Conservatism did not remake politics but rather built its influence on top of existing structures. Conservative politicians quickly became aware of the popularity of many domestic programs that on paper were easy to attack but in practice were almost impossible to retrench. Reagan and the Republican Senate were unable to eliminate most portions of the federal government. After flirting with reductions in Social Security in 1981, the administration backed off when it encountered stiff opposition. Federal spending increased significantly in the 1980s. As James T. Patterson found, federal spending reached 23.5 percent of GDP in 1983, falling only to 21.2 percent in 1989, which was still higher than in the 1970s. At the same time, the number of federal employees *expanded* to 3.1 million from 2.9 million when Reagan was in office.<sup>8</sup>

When dealing with national security, conservatives found that the legacy of Vietnam and the challenges from liberals to the national security state were deeply rooted. Reagan started his time in the White House by using vitriolic rhetoric about how he intended to weaken communism in areas such as Central America. However, by 1982 and 1983, Reagan found himself hamstrung by congressional Democrats as well as by public opinion, which was notably tepid about military intervention. An international nuclear freeze movement placed immense pressure on Republicans to tone down their aggressive stance toward the Soviets.<sup>9</sup>

Policy resilience was only one problem in the period of conservative governance. Once conservatives had power, it became clear that holding together the different factions of the movement would be difficult. Social conservatives were frustrated with Republican politicians for ignoring their issues. Many neoconservatives were angry when Reagan softened his position toward the Soviets during his second term. When the cold war came to an end in 1991 and conservatives lost their unifying issue of anticommunism, the internal tensions became more severe.

Following the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress, when

Democrat Bill Clinton was president, conservatives encountered similar problems on Capitol Hill. The Republican majority was razor thin in both the House and the Senate. This limited much of what conservatives could accomplish, given the veto power of the Senate minority. When Republicans forced a government shut-down in 1995–96 as they demanded steeper cuts in domestic spending than President Clinton was willing to accept, public opinion turned against the GOP, and the Republican leadership backed off many of its key demands. With the exception of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (which Clinton and Congress ended in 1996), most of the welfare state remained intact.

The biggest test of governance began in 2001. By then, conservatives were not only dealing with issues of governance, they had become the political establishment—a far cry from the 1964 presidential campaign, when Senator Barry Goldwater and his supporters were seen as renegade mavericks trying to shake up Washington. In Congress, Republicans after 1994 developed close working alliances with interest groups on K Street. Conservatives controlled Congress and the White House after 2002 (in 2001 the parties split control of the Senate until Senator Jim Jeffords bolted from the GOP in the summer, leaving Democrats in control), as well as the well-established universe of conservative think tanks, advocacy organizations, publications, and media outlets. Congressional reforms in the 1970s and 1990s had left the party leadership in both chambers with a formidable arsenal of procedural weapons to impose discipline on members of their own caucus and to stifle the participation of the opposition party. The Republican leadership consisted of seasoned veterans in the legislative process, such as Tom DeLay, who as both a minority and a majority party member had built the strength of the GOP in Congress by mastering the nuances of procedural conflict to undermine the Democrats.<sup>10</sup>

The presence of a conservative establishment was essential to Bush's pursuit of his broader political and policy objectives and his attempt to overcome the immense obstacles conservatives had struggled with over the preceding three decades. Without a clear

electoral mandate before his reelection in 2004 and facing thin governing majorities in Congress and high unpopularity ratings in his second term, the organizational and financial infrastructure of conservatism played a crucial role in providing him with the political muscle he had.

But the assistance from the conservative establishment that helped Bush achieve some of his objectives came at great political cost. Congressional Republicans struggled with the problems of corruption. Scandals involving the relationship of Republicans to corrupt lobbyists and their reliance on federal spending to pay off political loyalists brought down several key players, including House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, and were pivotal to bringing Democrats into power in the 2006 midterm elections.

Since the time of the Reagan administration, Republicans had also weakened the federal bureaucracy by underfunding key agencies and stacking administrative bodies with political loyalists. Whereas the strategy to weaken government without trying to directly retrench it had been shrewd, and to some extent successful, it became hugely problematic when Bush needed a stronger federal infrastructure to deal with issues ranging from hurricanes in the bayous to reconstructing a democratic Iraq.

Because conservatives had enjoyed power for a substantial amount of time, they had come to rely on federal spending and government largesse to satisfy their own electoral base. It was hard to wean the party from this spending habit. Republicans thus had trouble substantially reducing spending, not just because liberalism remained stronger than they had believed but also because Republicans feared offending key constituents and organized interest groups within the Republican coalition. The result was that spending continued to grow at a brisk pace after 2000.

One of the unexpected effects of Bush's presidency was to stimulate new forces and tactics within the Democratic Party. In 2004, many younger voters who had not participated in politics threw their support behind Vermont Governor Howard Dean's unsuccessful campaign for the Democratic nomination. Dean drew on new internet-based fund-raising and organizational tactics, and

appealed to many voters who had become disillusioned with the political system by taking a strong and forceful stand against Bush. While Dean lost the nomination, he redirected the party in fundamental ways. Many of the same sources of support returned to the campaign trail four years later.

During the 2008 campaign, Democrat Barack Obama tapped into this discontent by combining an antiestablishment and anti-conservative campaign to propel himself into the Democratic nomination and defeat his rival, Hillary Clinton. Obama connected Clinton to the conservative establishment, particularly on issues such as Iraq, and undercut her ability to capitalize on her experience.

With conservatives looking like the establishment in the eyes of many Americans, activists in the conservative movement started to rebel against their own leadership. The result was fractious and contentious debate among the Right.

The Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, and vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin predictably ran as agents of change and positioned themselves as opponents of the conservative establishment from which they came. At the convention, they reiterated the theme of change—though it was their party that was in power—and competed with Democrats not by defending the status quo but by calling for fundamental reform. Governor Palin told one audience that “John McCain has used his career to promote change. He doesn’t run with the Washington herd. Let’s send the maverick of the Senate to the White House.”

The transition of conservatism from an opposition movement to the governing establishment seemed complete, with Republicans rebelling even against their own predecessors. It was the particular challenges from the stage of governance that defined George W. Bush’s presidency.

Politically, the Bush presidency was not what Republicans had hoped for. If conservatives hoped for a coalition, which most did, the outcome could not have been more disappointing. The 2008 election resulted in a Democratic White House and Congress. The events surrounding the campaign raised questions about the basic

policies, ideas, and leaders of the Republican Party. The aftermath of the election revealed a striking dearth of respectable conservative leaders. With America battling an economic crisis as Bush exited the White House and with continued instability overseas, Bush's presidency concluded with conservatism in a state of political instability, raising serious questions about the future of the movement.

President Obama is unsure what will happen next, displaying skepticism that the conservative era is actually over. "What Reagan ushered in was a skepticism toward government solutions to every problem," Obama said, "a suspicion of command-and-control, top-down social engineering. I don't think that has changed. I think that's a lasting legacy of the Reagan era and the conservative movement, starting with Goldwater. But I do think [what we're seeing] is an end to the knee-jerk reaction toward the New Deal and big government."<sup>11</sup> In his first year in the White House, President Obama encountered significant difficulty moving forward most of his agenda and saw conservatives reenergized in their opposition to his signature measure, national health care reform. But if conservatism is to survive as a political movement, it will have to be by overcoming the condition it found itself in in the aftermath of the Bush presidency rather than as a result of what he accomplished.

It is impossible to tell how history will judge President Bush, given that interpretations of his tenure in office will change many times and be open to ongoing debate. Some historians who have weighed in point to decisions such as the surge of U.S. troops in Iraq, which stabilized conditions, as evidence of successful presidential leadership. Donald Critchlow has argued that "Bush's re-making of the Republican party was a major achievement. By strengthening party organization at the national and state levels, Bush . . . enabled the GOP to harness grassroots activism to win control of Congress and the White House."<sup>12</sup> Yet a majority of professional historians (who do tend to come from the liberal side of the political spectrum) have been less sanguine. For a cover story in *Rolling Stone*, "The Worst President in History?," Sean Wilentz

began by saying, “Bush’s presidency appears headed for colossal historical disgrace.”<sup>13</sup>

The historians whose essays appear in this book do not attempt to resolve this debate. The chapters catalogue some of the successes of the administration, ranging from counterterrorism efforts against al Qaeda between 2001 and 2003 through AIDS policy in Africa to the appointment of minorities to prominent government positions. They also examine some of the failures, including the damage caused by the war in Iraq, the bungled response to Hurricane Katrina, and the devastating collapse of financial markets following years of deregulation in the fall of 2008. Rather than speculate whether he was the worst or the best president in U.S. history, the contributors have attempted to place the Bush White House in a broader historical perspective by understanding his presidency in relationship to the conservative movement.

The authors of the essays in this book are trying to write a first take on the history of this period, but one that builds on the rich literature on the history of conservatism in modern America. We hope the essays provoke further investigation. Since this is an early effort to write the history of the George W. Bush presidency, the work is necessarily incomplete. We do not yet have access to some archival materials that will become available in the future. Yet, in addition to the substantial documentation instantaneously available in the age of the Internet, the contributors also have the advantage of producing this interpretation at a time when the emotions and sentiment and context of President Bush’s actions are still vivid. We hope these essays offer the opening to a conversation that will continue for centuries.