

This is my third introduction of a biography at Politics and Prose, and it is always a pleasure for me to return to Washington—where I was born 83 years ago and went to elementary, junior high, and high school before going off to University.

I was not permitted to interview Bush for the biography. Dick Cheney, whom I interviewed a number of times, set up an interview for me with the former president at the Bush Library in Dallas. But just before I went out, I received a telephone call from one of Bush's aides. "The president does not wish to see you," he said. "You wrote a book critical of his father, and for that reason he does not wish to see you." Which was true. In 1992 I wrote *George Bush's War*, which was highly critical of Bush 41's decision to attack Iraq.

Before I begin, let me make two remarks to put the biography in context. First, when it came to national security policy, George W. Bush was absolutely in charge and the decisions were all his. He was indeed The Decider. After 9/11 he relished his role as commander in chief, and everything became chain of command. Bush was not a tool of Cheney, or Condoleezza Rice, or the neo-cons, or anyone else. He was the driving force. Whether it was CIA renditions, NSA snooping, or the war in Iraq, these were all personal decisions of the president, and everyone in the administration fell into line.

In that context, let me say a word about the National Security Council. The NSC was established by the Republican 80th Congress in 1947 to prevent the concentration of power in the White House as had occurred under FDR during World War II. It was modeled after the British War Cabinet and was intended to bring the secretary of state, secretary of defense, the military leadership, and the head of the CIA into conference with the president on national security issues. That was the National Security Council. Truman used the NSC that way and so did Eisenhower. Eisenhower met every Thursday at 10 o'clock with the NSC and during his eight years in the White House presided over 314 meetings.

The change came under John Kennedy. Kennedy saw the NSC as a vehicle to enhance White House control—exactly the opposite of its original purpose. McGeorge Bundy was appointed the president's National Security Advisor (neither Truman nor Eisenhower had one), and the size of the staff mushroomed. Under Truman and Ike, the NSC staff were basically note-takers and minute keepers and numbered three or four people. Under JFK, the staff increased to twenty and began to handle policy issues. It doubled again when Kissinger became National Security Advisor under Nixon, and by the time George W. Bush took office numbered well over a hundred. These were professional experts in specific areas. In many respects, the National Security Act of 1947 had been turned on its head. Instead of being a body that coordinated government policy as was intended, the NSC staff became a policy-making tool of the president. Bush ran policy from the White House, and the NSC staff enabled him to do so.

The second point I would like to make initially is that George W. Bush was a born-again Christian and saw the world in Biblical terms. That was especially true after 9/11. Bush defined the battle against terrorism as a struggle between good and evil, and saw himself as God's agent

put on earth to defeat the forces of Satan. That religious fixation is the common denominator behind the domestic excesses of his administration and foreign policy blunders.

The contrast to Abraham Lincoln is striking. In 1861, shortly after the battle of Bull Run, a delegation of Protestant clergymen called on Lincoln in the White House. The spokesman for the group told Lincoln he had had a vision from heaven the night before, and the Lord had told him he was on the president's side. "I hope the Lord is on my side," Lincoln replied. "But what I really need is Kentucky."

George Bush was born in New Haven, Connecticut, July 6, 1946. Upon his father's graduation the family moved to Texas and the senior Bush went into the oil business. George W. grew up in Midland, Texas, and when it came time for high school was sent to Andover, where he finished near the bottom of his class. The dean of students at Andover told him not to apply to Yale because his grades were so low he could not get in, but Bush applied and was admitted.

George was a fourth-generation legacy—his great grandfather, grandfather, and father had all gone to Yale—and at the time he applied, Yale was admitting fifty-two percent of the legacy applicants. By contrast, Harvard and Princeton were admitting about fourteen percent. Kingman Brewster became president of Yale during George's freshman year, changed the rules, and Yale adopted the same legacy quotas as Princeton and Harvard. George W had three younger brothers (including Jeb) and one sister, all of whom had precisely the same legacy credentials that he did and far better secondary school records, but none were admitted to Yale because Brewster had changed the rules.

Bush did no better at Yale than he did at Andover, returned to Texas, and spent the next five years in the wilderness. His father arranged for him to be commissioned in the Texas Air National Guard—which deferred him from service in Vietnam—and his career in the Guard has become a matter of controversy. It was during these five years that Bush drank heavily and used drugs. He was admitted to Harvard Business School in September 1973, and is one of the very few graduates of Harvard Business School—if not the only one—not to have a job offer when he graduated. Bush had fifty-three interviews with prospective employers at the Business School but did not receive one job offer. One of Bush's classmates told me his classmates considered him "dynamically ignorant."

With no job offer, Bush returned to Texas, and like his father, went into the oil business, buying leases on property hoping to strike oil. In 1977 he married Laura Welch, and the following year ran for Congress as the Republican nominee to succeed retiring Democratic congressman George Mahon. Bush lost the election and returned to the oil business. He prospered for several years through family connections, but a downturn in oil prices hit hard. Bush profited from several fortuitous mergers and eventually sold out.

It was during this period that Bush became a born-again Christian. In his memoirs, Bush credits Billy Graham with his re-discovery of God, but the fact is his conversion came a year

earlier in Midland thanks to a lesser known evangelist named Arthur Blissitt. This was also the time that Bush gave up drinking. The occasion was his fortieth birthday celebration at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs. Bush became hopelessly intoxicated, woke up the next morning with an incredible hangover, and resolved to quit drinking. Laura quipped it was because he got the bar bill for that evening's celebration. Actually, it was because George recognized he had a problem and his father was gearing up to run for president. He did not want to embarrass his father, so he stopped drinking.

It was 1986, and no longer in the oil business, George and his family moved to Washington to assist his father's presidential campaign. George was given an office at campaign headquarters in the Woodward building on 15th Street between Lee Atwater, who was managing the campaign, and Roger Ailes who was handling the media (and is now head of Fox News), and for the next two years learned about electoral politics from two highly gifted practitioners. Poppy ran against Michael Dukakis, and George saw firsthand how to run a presidential campaign.

When the election was over in November 1988, George declined an appointment to work in his father's administration and returned to Texas. He started an informal campaign for governor, and at the same time helped organize a syndicate to buy the Texas Rangers baseball team. The Rangers were the former Washington Senators, an expansion team which had been formed here in 1961 and moved to Texas in 1972. They were scarcely pennant contenders. The deal to buy the team came through, Bush stepped back from running for governor, and for the next four years was the very public head of the Rangers (although he only owned two percent), built a new stadium, and basked in the glow of an improving franchise.

Bush assisted in his father's reelection bid in 1992 from a distance, and when Clinton won that election set his sights on running for governor in Texas. Jeb at the same time decided to run for governor of Florida. Bush was running against incumbent Ann Richards who was heavily favored. In Florida, Jeb was favored to defeat Democratic incumbent Lawton Chiles. But the election was an upset. George won in Texas; Jeb lost in Florida. And the 1994 election made George, not Jeb, the likely successor to their father.

Texas is the second largest state and also the second largest in terms of population, but the governor has no executive authority. That reflects the post-Reconstruction constitution of 1876 that stripped power from the governor. The governor of Texas is essentially a symbolic figure, similar to the Queen of England. Most scholars of state government consider the Texas governorship the weakest in the United States. The Texas governor cannot even issue pardons to persons wrongly convicted, much less direct government agencies. In that setting, Bush thrived. As the symbolic leader of Texas, he was widely applauded and was overwhelmingly reelected in 1998. He also built an efficient political machine led by Karl Rove and Karen Hughes, and was quietly exploring the possibility of running for president in 2000. His father was helpful, and so were those who had worked for his father, such as George Shultz and Dick Cheney.

Bush announced his candidacy in June 1999, defeated John McCain in the primaries, and was nominated almost unanimously by the Republican convention. Al Gore was the Democratic nominee and heavily favored. But Gore fumbled. He chose Joseph Lieberman, the most conservative Democrat in the Senate, as his running mate; ostentatiously snubbed Bill Clinton who was still president; and did poorly in his three television debates with Bush. The choice of Lieberman and the snubbing of Clinton gave third party candidate Ralph Nader an opening on the left—he would ultimately poll almost three million votes—and the election came down to Florida. Gore failed to carry ten states that Clinton carried in 1996—any one of which would have put him over the top. The Supreme Court ultimately decided the election when it upheld the count submitted by Florida’s secretary of state, and on December 12—some thirty-five days after the election—Bush emerged as the winner.

Bush was superb as a politician seeking votes. But had no executive experience, little knowledge of international affairs, had not really travelled abroad, a short attention span, and genuinely believed that he was God’s agent. With the exception of selecting Colin Powell to be secretary of state, Don Rumsfeld as secretary of defense, and Don Evans at Commerce, he delegated the selection of his cabinet and other top-level federal officials to Dick Cheney, and closeted himself in the White House with a staff from the governor’s office in Texas, plus Condoleezza Rice as his national security adviser and Andy Card as his chief of staff. It is inconceivable that FDR would have entrusted the selection of his cabinet and sub-cabinet to John Garner, that Ike would have trusted Nixon, or that Reagan would have relied on George’s father.

As a result of Cheney’s input, Bush took office with a phalanx of sub-cabinet appointees who were powerfully motivated and already equipped to provide intellectual justification for the president’s policies. Conservative in outlook and crisply articulate, these were like-minded ideologues and long-time friends—including Scooter Libby, Paul Wolfowitz, and Elliot Abrams.

Cheney played an important role during Bush’s first two years. He had an office in the White House, and his staff was integrated with Bush’s staff. They were all White House staff. The administration’s position on energy, the revision of the tax code, and after 9/11 the presidential directive to try captured Al Qaeda members by military commissions all reflected Cheney’s input. But over the years his influence faded.

Initially, Bush devoted himself to domestic issues. The United States under Clinton had run a budget surplus for the past three years, and Clinton had applied the surplus to reducing the federal debt. Bush insisted that the surplus should be returned to the taxpayers. “It’s your money,” he famously said. At his urging, Congress enacted one of the largest tax cuts in American history. He also pressed for education reform, in this case, No Child Left Behind, which Congress also enacted.

Bush rarely touched foreign policy issues his first months in office, but when he did it was with a determination to assert American supremacy. The Clinton administration and South Korea had worked hard to bring North Korea back into the family of nations. The United States

and South Korea would provide economic assistance, and in return North Korea would abandon its nuclear program. Madeline Albright visited Pyongyang in December 2000, and South Korean president Kim Dae-jung came to Washington in March 2001 to put the final seal on the deal. North Korea was on the verge of renouncing nuclear weapons and concluding a peace treaty with the South. But Bush rejected the idea. The North Koreans were evil, he believed, and the government must be replaced. This was Bush's personal decision. He also rejected the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the International Criminal Court, and an international convention on biological weapons.

The attacks on 9/11 were a surprise, but merely reinforced Bush's view of good versus evil. In many respects, 9/11 has been a defining moment in American history. By conflating the attacks with Saddam Hussein, Bush led the United States into a three-trillion dollar war in Iraq. He promulgated an egregious doctrine of preventative war, alienated America's allies, weakened its alliances, and inspired young Muslims throughout the world to join the jihad. Domestically, the hysteria unleashed by the Bush administration undermined civil liberty, eroded the rule of law, and tarnished respect for the traditional American values of tolerance and moderation.

"I am the war president," Bush once boasted. On September 12, he assumed total responsibility and total authority as the nation's commander in chief. When Cheney offered to head a group of cabinet officers to devise policy, Bush rejected the offer. "This is the job of the commander in chief and cannot be delegated," said the president.

Rather than treat the events of 9/11 as isolated incidents, rather than handle them through the legal process, Bush depicted them as acts of war by the forces of evil. I will not go into Bush's assault on American civil liberty. I devote two chapters to NSA spying and the torture trail, and the record is clear. Bush genuinely believed he was fighting the forces of Satan, and as a result no holds were barred. Whether it was "enhanced interrogation techniques," "extraordinary rendition," or the intercept of private communications here in the United States, Bush thought he was God's agent in the final fight to rid the world of evil.

Let me say a few words about the war in Iraq. From the beginning, Bush was determined to remove Saddam Hussein. The intervention in Afghanistan was a warm-up. Bush instructed the Defense Department to prepare to invade Iraq, and ignored the findings of UN weapons inspectors Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei that Saddam had no weapons of mass destruction.

Planning for the invasion of Iraq began in early 2002. The military assumed the purpose was to remove Saddam, destroy whatever weapons of mass destruction might be found, and leave Iraq as soon as possible. Rumsfeld and Franks believed ninety days should be sufficient. And that is what the military planned for. The invasion took place, Saddam was toppled, and the military began to withdraw, leaving it to the Iraqis to work things out. As both the State and Defense departments saw it, Iraq had been liberated and it was up to the Iraqis to move ahead. The Baathist party remained in control, the army remained in place under American tutelage, and

a senior leadership council established by General Jay Garner was developing plans for a new government. Iraq was still a secular state.

But on May 1, 2003, speaking on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* under a banner that read “Mission Accomplished,” Bush said that the purpose of the invasion was to bring democracy to Iraq, and that U.S. forces would remain there until that was accomplished. Bush changed the mission without consulting anyone. The decision was unilateral. Instead of liberators, the Army would now become occupiers and would bring democracy to Iraq. Rumsfeld, Franks, and Powell were dumbfounded but acquiesced. In retrospect, they should not have done so.

Let me digress for a moment to explain the difference between being liberators and occupiers. Liberators set a country free. Occupiers impose their will. In World War II, as D-Day approached, Eisenhower did not want to be burdened governing French territory the Allies would take back from the Germans. So over FDR’s vigorous objections he brought Charles de Gaulle from North Africa and entrusted him with governing liberated France. Six days after D-Day, de Gaulle landed in France and the Free French movement became the government. U.S., British, and Canadian troops moved ahead without regard for what was happening in France. That was de Gaulle’s responsibility. But when they crossed into Germany, the country was occupied. All government was disbanded and the Allies took control. France was liberated; Germany was occupied. It’s an important distinction.

As for Iraq, the Defense Department, the State Department, and the military all assumed they were liberating Iraq from Saddam and that the Iraqis would work things out after he was deposed. Then on May 1, Bush unilaterally changed direction. Instead of being liberators, coalition forces would become occupiers. It was downhill from there. Paul Bremer was appointed to head the occupation as the president’s representative, the Baathist party was outlawed, the Iraqi army was disbanded, and most government offices closed. Bremer reported directly to the White House, not to the Defense Department or the State Department. Coalition forces became occupiers, and for many Iraqis they became the enemy. Bush bears sole responsibility for that decision.

I’d like to say a word about Abu Ghraib. We all saw the hideous photos. What we did not know at the time was that the military guards at the prison were encouraged by the CIA and military intelligence to rough up the prisoners before they were interrogated. This wasn’t something the guards did on their own. Four subsequent military investigations, the first by Major General Antonio Taguba, have documented clearly that the outrages we saw were a deliberate effort to break the will of the prisoners before they were interrogated.

By 2006 Bush had become deeply discouraged about the situation in Iraq. He authorized the surge in the number of U.S. troops to regain the initiative, and found General David Petraeus to command it. Petraeus is an interesting figure. The Army passed him over for promotion to lieutenant general in 2003, among other things because they thought he was too ambitious. He

was promoted to the three-star rank by the president on Rumsfeld's recommendation, and his career took off. But he was indeed ambitious. When he was head of the CIA, a group of Princeton alumni, including some of my classmates, wanted him to become president of Princeton and then seek the Republican presidential nomination in 2016—just as Eisenhower had done when he was president of Columbia. That effort failed when Petraeus's affair with Paula Broadwell became public and the Obama administration cut off his head.

The surge in Iraq indeed helped, but it was not the most decisive factor in restoring order. Far more important were the Anbar Awakening in which the Sunni leadership of Anbar province turned against the radical ISI [Islamic State of Iraq] leadership; the decision of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr at the urging of Iran to order his Mahdi Army to stand down; and the de facto sectarian segregation that had taken place in major cities. But in any event by the end of 2007 a semblance of order had been achieved, and in late 2008, just before he left office, Bush went to Baghdad to sign an agreement with Prime Minister Maliki providing for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of 2011. (That was when a disgruntled Iraqi threw his shoes at Bush.)

Let me suggest that Bush's decision to invade Iraq was the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American president. That does not mean that Bush was America's worst president. Bush's domestic accomplishments are significant. No Child Left Behind has been a valuable addition to the educational program in the United States, particularly for children from disadvantaged families, and the amendment of Medicare to provide prescription drugs for seniors is a remarkable achievement. Bush also took the lead in the global fight against AIDS, particularly in Africa, and under his leadership the disease has been brought under control. At Bush's urging, Congress appropriated almost \$50 billion to combat AIDS, and Bush remains active in the fight. He also expanded American free trade. When Bush took office, the United States had free trade agreements with Israel, Canada, and Mexico. When he left office, the United States had free trade agreements with sixteen countries. Bush also concluded an agreement with Putin to reduce the number of nuclear weapons each country maintained, and improved relations with China.

But I think Bush's most important accomplishment was to contain the economic meltdown in 2008. Against all of his instincts and deeply held beliefs he bailed out Wall Street and the American auto industry and avoided another Great Depression. Unlike the war in Iraq, or the fight against terrorists at home, this time Bush listened to his advisors. Hank Paulson, the secretary of the Treasury, and Ben Bernanke, chairman of the Federal Reserve, carved out the strategy of support, and Bush adopted it. From bailing out subprime mortgage lenders and insurance conglomerates, to rescuing the market itself with a massive Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). Bush deserves credit for taking the necessary actions. It was a remarkable achievement and probably saved the world's economy. Why they failed to rescue Lehman Brothers is another story, but that is Paulson, not Bush.

I haven't said anything about Bush's personal life, but let me be brief. He was always an early riser, getting up each morning at 5:45 and going to bed shortly before ten. He was a physical fitness buff and exercised for two hours daily in the White House gym. Bush was also not a detail man. He wanted short memos and brief descriptions.

He and Laura were close, and kept White House entertaining to a minimum. I have not said anything about Laura, but she was a major source of support for Bush. She took her responsibilities seriously, and did not seek the limelight. She usually accompanied Bush on his trips abroad, and provided great comfort for him. Paul Sarbanes, a long-serving United States senator from Maryland, and a staunch Democrat, told me he thought Laura was the best first lady he had ever met. (And Paul became a member of Congress when Pat Nixon was first lady.)

As an ex-president, Bush has been exemplary. Unlike most of his predecessors, he does not miss the office and does not try to second-guess Obama. "Free at last," Bush told friends in Dallas after Obama's inauguration. In many respects, he is a model for what ex-presidents should be.

As I said, I don't think George Bush was America's worst president. But I do think his decision to attack Iraq was the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American president and it gets worse as time goes on.

Thank you very much.