

HISTORY IS THE LAST REFUGE OF SCOUNDRELS

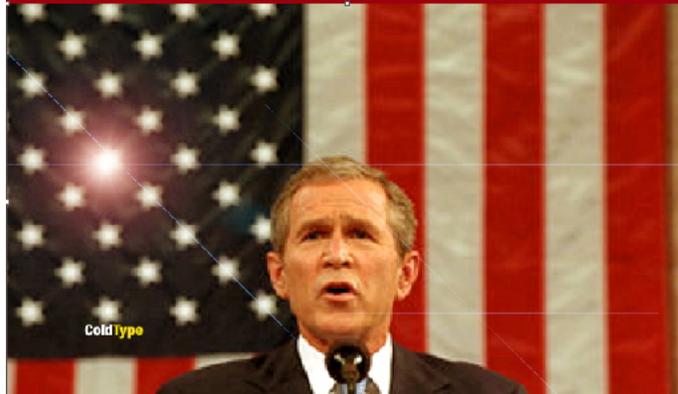
DAVID MICHAEL GREEN



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David Michael Green is a professor of political science at Hofstra University in New York. He is delighted to receive readers' reactions to his articles (mailto: dmg@regressiveantidote.net), but regrets that time constraints do not always allow him to respond.

More of his work can be found at his website, <http://regressiveantidote.net>

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e'll never know whether Germanicus, the highly accomplished Roman general, was mortified by the actions of his spawn, the insane and insanely destructive emperor Caligula. Or whether he was even more humiliated that, on top of that particularly notable contribution to imperial history, his grandson Nero would later strive valiantly to best the family high-water mark for sheer degenerate depravity.

We won't know because Germanicus had the good grace or the good fortune to die before either of them came to power.

Not so George H. W. Bush. He's still very alive, and there's little he can do to avoid the shame of having fathered the boy who nearly ruined America, and may yet still do so in his remaining 17 months as the country's emperor. Back in the day, of course, the shamed father would have removed himself to the garden shed or some other suitable location on the family compound and "done the right thing" to avoid the stinging stigma of responsibility for a mess now so large it makes the Exxon Valdez look like a stopped-up toilet in comparison. But I guess Poppy finds denial a more convenient route.

The Bushes and the Walkers, and certainly any fool dumb enough to carry the moniker George Herbert Walker Bush, are the bluest of American blue bloods. And so it is tempting to think that they have always been so completely in it for themselves that it doesn't much matter to them that their progeny has single-handedly almost wrecked a republic two-plus centuries old, and one, moreover, that is the reigning great power of its day. As long as they can check out at the Carlyle Group cashier's window on their way to Dubai, who cares if a country of 300 million goes down the toilet?

And yet Poppy, like the Kennedys and Al Gore and John Kerry, went to war – the front lines, no less – when it was expected of them, risking life and limb. This is no small deal, reckless youthful abandon notwithstanding. Joe Kennedy never made it home. JFK, Poppy and John Kerry each had close brushes with death in battlefield action. This business of risking one's own life for queen and country is not exactly the sort of thing you might expect from a completely self-interested cad who could

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care less about the fate of the nation. Of course, a more cynical take is that some or all of these lads, destined for a life of pre-planned greatness, took a calculated gamble, knowing that a heroic war story, if they survived, would catapult them ahead of the pack on the way to their personal rendezvous with destiny.

I don't doubt that that motivation was lurking in there – somewhere in the mix with machismo, peer pressure and impressing chicks back home – when these guys marched off to war. I do tend to doubt, however, that this instrumental approach to personal ambition was the sole or even primary motivator for this group. After all, the risk was very, very real, as the death of Joe Junior, whose successful rise to the pinnacle of American political power and glory was all mapped out for him, emphatically proved. Moreover, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton and, ahem, a couple of clowns named Bush and Cheney would later prove that you could still make it to the top without a military resume – and even defeat war heroes along the way – if you had the requisite combination of smarts, hunger, luck, skill at lying, and an instinct for the jugular. So why risk it all on some patriotic fantasy scripted for the hoi polloi?

My sense, honestly, is that Poppy Bush is many things – with most of them on the political and fatherly fronts more than a little distasteful – but that he is nevertheless also a believer in America and a patriot. If so, ouch. That's gotta hurt. Because that means he cares about the country, he believes in its tropes, and he must know at some level, a level hard to suppress sufficiently deep enough, that he is the guy who gave the world the guy who is wrecking it all.

In fact, we know he knows, because it was revealed in a recent New York Times article that people walk up to him all the time and say how much they appreciate and like him, but, um, er, uh, like what the fuck happened with your kid, man?

That is no small blow to the heart, of course, as both a father and a patriot, but the problem certainly extends beyond the Papa and the Mama Bush (somehow I suspect rather fewer folks have the courage to say that to Mrs. Bush, and thus risk the famously terrible Wrath of Bar). There's everyone in the family, to start with, not least of which poor Jebby, who's stuck watching the stock of "Bush", the brand, sink lower every day, until it joins the looming fate that his brother's policy on global warming has relegated to small island nations in the Pacific with an elevation (today) of about four feet. At this rate, pretty soon now a guy named Jeb Bush will have about as good a chance at getting elected president as a one named Jeb Hitler. Poor dude. He was the guy who was always supposed to be president, not Calamity George, the family screw-up since day one. Ain't that a kick in the pants? There's all kinds of ways to lose the presidency, lots of which are completely out of your control, but to have your own brother do it for you? Little Bro's got to be wondering if

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even Rove could figure out a way to pull off selling these damaged goods. Maybe a name change, eh? “Vote Jeb Smith for president, a great guy you’ve never heard of before!” I dunno. Doesn’t have much of a ring to it.

And then there’s Boy George, himself. Clearly, he too has got the denial thing down to a fine art. No doubt a lifetime of practice will do that for you, especially when the stakes are so high. When you’re the black-sheep clown-prince child of a father and grandfather whose lists of business and political accomplishments (however skanky) run from here to China (pun intended), you better at least be excellent at fooling yourself, since you can’t accomplish anything else that remotely compares. The other alternative, honestly acknowledging what a disaster you are, is too horrible to contemplate. Most people don’t have the constitution to take a blow that big and get up off the ground again, least of all this perfectly pampered perennial punk of perpetual perfidy (Agnew lives!).

And, actually, such self-deception is not really all that difficult to pull off, especially when you’re president. What you do is surround yourself with people who always tell you what you want to hear, and then scream at and humiliate anyone who ever strays even slightly from that path. That will take care of just about everyone who’s a Republican (except for some of those selfish careerists in Congress who oddly value keeping their jobs over reinforcing W’s fantasy world, but they bought the whole package long ago, and there’s no going back). And, of course, for the odd staffer like Colin Powell or Christie Todd Whitman who are strangely only willing to bend over nine-tenths of the way, there remains the defenestration defense. There aren’t too many problems that a well ventilated room on the tenth floor won’t fix. Anyhow, then you make sure that you only speak at events with pre-selected sycophants and Kool-Aid Drinkers in attendance, or military personnel unable to candidly address their commander-in-chief. You also want to scare the crap out of the press (easily done) so that they’re afraid to ask you any questions even remotely relevant or challenging, and then do the same with the Democrats (even easier), so that they never seriously challenge your authority or power, even when your job approval ratings are in the mid-20s. And finally, hire Dick Cheney to always be around reminding you what a bad dude you are. Plenty bad man. The very baddest of the bad. That’s what Dick says, anyhow.

That’s a pretty effective formula, and by all accounts it seems to have produced considerable success. I believe George Bush when he says that he sleeps well at night. And appearances suggest that he is still having the binge party of his life as The Decider, choosing from the menu of options that Cheney puts before him on all the big issues. Like on Iraq, for instance: Invade the country on a Monday, invade on a Tuesday, etc. Lots of options – so what if they all seem so similar? Cheney must

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have good reasons for lining them up like that.

But, alas, all is not so well in the kingdom. The good king's people are not content, and sometimes there is no masking that. Maybe it is even Laura or Poppy who bursts the bubble with the occasional infuriatingly off-script honest reminder of truth, who knows? In any case, it always seems to creep in, around, under and over the barricades, like the flood waters in New Orleans – and with the same potential for damage.

This, then, is where the last line of defense comes in, the final, impenetrable barrier between George Bush's egg-shell fragile sense of self-worth and the awful truth.

“Patriotism”, so Samuel Johnson famously argued, “is the last refuge of scoundrels”. Turns out he was wrong. It's actually the second-to-last. Without question, we've seen a lot of scoundrels these last years, a lot of scoundrelism, and a whole lot of the use of patriotism as a refuge from the fallout to these scoundrels' scoundrelism. And for four or five years, it actually worked pretty well. Problem is, it's worn mighty thin, and something else is now required – a last, last refuge of scoundrels.

Enter history. What a perfect alibi. The only one potentially better is religion – this nightmare has been god's will all along, doncha know? But most Americans aren't yet angry enough at their deities to buy that one, though it has already been discreetly run up the flag pole more than a few times. Hardly anybody saluted, though. Quite a few hurled. So that leaves history instead, which – like religion – has the wonderful attribute of complete unfalsifiability, at least in this lifetime.

Here's how it works. The public, world opinion, historians uncharacteristically willing to comment before a half-century has gone by, even members of his own party – they've all got it wrong. Only George W. Bush – you know, the guy who got gentleman's Cs in college, the guy who spent forty years as a drunk, the guy who invaded a deeply divided Muslim country without knowing that there even was such a thing as Sunnis and Shiites – only this wise seer across the millennia got it right. Only this prophet (or is it profit?), unheralded in his own time, this erudite scholar of Big Picture History, was able to see this biggest of big pictures.

See, you may think that lying and invading a country for no remotely valid reason whatsoever is among the greatest follies a president can commit, especially if it all goes badly awry. But George Bush and History know better.

You may think that letting the gang who supposedly attacked us on 9/11 roam free to plan further attacks would be a really stupid idea. But George Bush and History will ultimately demonstrate the obscure yet powerful logic proving the wisdom behind that policy decision.

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You may think that doing nothing and allowing one of your country's major cities to drown represents, at best, criminal negligence. But you obviously don't know History like that great scholar of the subject, George W. Bush, does.

You probably operate under the commonly-held illusion that turning, virtually overnight, the country's greatest-ever surplus into its greatest-ever deficit is not a quality we should particularly admire in our presidents. But George W. Bush knows that History will vindicate him in the end.

And you undoubtedly think that exacerbating the threat of a looming environmental crisis while undermining every attempt to solve the problem ought to be an impeachable offense. But George Bush understands that History – should it manage to survive – will write the story quite differently.

How can he be so sure to get a favorable reception from history, when the odds seem so daunting? He could adopt Winston Churchill's method. The old man once said that "History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it." That might work, except for two small problems. One is that Churchill had way more raw material to work with than Bush. He actually got the one big thing of his era right, when others didn't (and even though he messed up a lot of other stuff along the way). The other problem with the Churchill plan is that the prime minister actually knew how to speak the language, a necessary predicate to writing history, whereas the verbal skills of the Toxic Texan might charitably be described as laughable at best.

"Couldn't I just buy some historians?", W is no doubt wondering. Don't doubt that the thought hasn't more than once crossed the mind, such as it is, of this ultimate child of privilege, who has had everything in his entire lifetime handed to, if not stolen for, him.

Indeed, perhaps they've already begun the process. After all, there are a whole lot of "scholars" at the Heritage Foundation and similar institutions who will soon be badly in need of some work, now that their previous theories have crashed and burned and angry lynch mobs will soon be prowling the capitol, on the hunt for regressives foolish enough to have strayed from the rapidly thinning herd.

Bush could hire an army of publicists masquerading as historians to fill a library with such nonsense. No doubt he will. It's hard to see how it could matter, though. Beyond the many disasters enumerated on the very partial list above, he has essentially four arguments by which he believes that his presidency is ultimately vindicated. None of these, of course, are legitimate, and three of them are minor league (Bush League?) anyhow, compared to the fourth.

One is that he delivered a great educational package, No Child Left Behind, and in so doing reformed America's ruined public system of pedagogy. Turns out there's a

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bit more (and less) to the story, though. Like test scores that haven't risen. Like angry teachers, parents and students who despise the legislation. Like unfunded mandates that the states can't handle. Like any subject other than English and math being unceremoniously chucked in the garbage can because they don't contribute to the all-determinative ratings of students and schools, and therefore the bottom-line for funding allocations. Oh, and then there are the minor matters of states' rights and small government that regressives are always endlessly pretending to care about. Too bad about that massive intrusion of the federal government into educational policy, eh? But then it wouldn't be right if it wasn't hypocritical, would it?

Bush's second great claim to fame is that his tax cuts (actually tax transfers – from the wealthy to the rest of us, and from this generation to the next) have created a robust economy during his tenure. Again, it doesn't even really look good on paper, let alone in the real world. First of all, the economy seems woefully lacking in solidity of late, as though it could come apart at the seams at any moment. Even Wall Street has probably noticed that by now, though I doubt anyone there is wishing they could get a do-over and vote for Kerry. Secondly, whatever the economy has been these last years, it sure hasn't done anything for the middle-, working- or under-classes. It's been a rip-roaring wild wagon ride for the top one or two percent, who now literally own like about half the country. But we poor slobs living below Economic Olympus are lucky if we're breaking even these days. And then, of course, there's the not so small matter of the cost paid to achieve this allegedly stellar economy. The supposed tax cuts have massively exacerbated the national debt, currently just shy of \$9 trillion, or about \$60,000 per taxpayer, and increasing at the rate of about \$1.5 billion per day, plus interest. Hey, what a bargain, huh? In exchange for your \$60,000 (and rapidly rising) debt liability, you got a tepid economy that further enriched the leisure class, a couple of useless wars, and no money left over for Social Security or Medicare when you retire. If you can retire.

Maybe it's just my own radical loony-left bias, but I don't think history is going to look to kindly on the administration's policies or 'successes' in the economic domain, any more than in the educational. Not, by the way, that the tax transfers were ever intended for that purpose anyhow. Remember how Bush advocated for them in 2000, during the campaign, when the economy was ripping? And how just months later he insisted on them again in 2001, when the economy had by then gone south? Gee, if only he hadn't been so hammered that day in his macro economics course when they discussed countercyclical fiscal policy. Maybe he would have realized that the same prescription doesn't work for both a boom and a bust economy. Of course, that (wrongly) presumes that economic theory, good governance or fundamental principle had the slightest relationship to the administration's motivation for the

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slashing of taxes. Instead, as with so many BushCo initiatives, the arrow between cause and effect was bent backwards. You start with what you want to do and then figure out a way to justify it afterwards. As the Downing Street Memo reminds us, “the facts were being fixed around the policy” – not the other way around.

A third ‘success’ that the administration claims, rightly so, is that they’ve loaded up the federal bench with as many über-class legal neanderthals as they could find. And if they also happened to be racist, sex-obsessed freaks as well, then, hey, more’s the merrier. If these robed regressives didn’t have skinned knuckles they could pass for eighteenth century spoiled rotten English aristocrats any day. Yep – no doubt about it. They did it. These monsters are everywhere you turn in the federal judiciary, and they’re going to be there for a very long time. And it’s even true that many Americans are happy at the notion of having ‘conservative’ judges dominating the bench. Some will even still be happy about that five or ten years from now. A lot of others, however, are going to find out what these judges are really all about (hint: it goes jingle-jangle in your pocket – or more properly, in someone else’s pocket), and they’re going to have some serious second thoughts about the pig in the poke they purchased during the Bush years, a gift that will keep on giving for decades.

All this – education, taxes, judges – is well and good, of course. But at the end of the day the Bush presidency has really staked its entire reputation on just one claim, a fact that even they might admit to. This is the “war president”, remember? And this presidency is all about security. Bush believes he will live or die in the history books according to this single criterion, and he may be right. (I actually believe that the last word on the Bush administration and the regressive movement it championed will show that everything – and I mean everything – was about kleptocracy. But, meanwhile, there’s 9/11 and a couple of wars to consider, with maybe a third to come in Iran if Cheney gets his way – and doesn’t he always? – so this is still the war president.)

That said, it is more clear than the space between Bush’s ears that the administration has been a complete failure on this front. The big bad guy and his pals who supposedly did 9/11 roams free to this day, six years after the attack. Meanwhile, the war in Afghanistan is going the same direction as that other war. The US military has been crushed in Iraq, a country which had as much to do with 9/11 as did, say, Kyrgyzstan or Burkina Faso, and which posed the equivalent (non-)risk to American security. Our border patrol is so vigilant that a known carrier of tuberculosis can waltz right in. Our ports and chemical and nuclear facilities remain almost no less completely vulnerable than they were six years ago, because the industries’ desire to avoid spending a nickel on security bests all other government priorities. Our

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alliances have been left in tatters by an administration whose arrogance was only ever trumped by its hubris. Our friends in China and Russia laugh at their good fortune to have keystone cops for rivals, watching as we shoot ourselves simultaneously in both feet with an insanely massive arsenal, while they rapidly rise in economic and military – and therefore also political – power.

These are the supposed successes, not one of which – surprise, surprise – turns out to be. I've only barely begun to list the failures. You could spend a lifetime recounting those.

As with oil industry-paid 'scientists' who amazingly produce skeptical findings about global warming, no doubt some Richard Mellon Scaife of the future will fund a 'revisionist' historian or two to describe all of this as a great misunderstood triumph. Fortunately, however, all the others will see it for the complete and thorough disaster it unquestionably represents.

Bob Woodward once asked Bush, "How is history likely to judge your Iraq war?" His response? "History, we don't know – we'll all be dead."

Notwithstanding that this is perhaps the most honest sentence ever to pass across this sorry Caligula's perpetually lying lips, he might also have mentioned, while he was at it, that one hell of a lot of us are already dead because of his lies and aggression.

Like about a million Iraqi civilians, so far. And counting.

Yeah, you'd think he might have mentioned that part. Unless you're the Bush administration, that is, for whom not counting is just yet another way of lying and aggressing.

Welcome to History, regressive style.



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