

# Re: The Psychology Behind the Worst Possible President

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- *From:* "Homer J Simpson" <nobody@xxxxxxxxxxx>
  - *Date:* Sat, 20 Jan 2007 06:43:54 GMT
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"Frank Raffaeli" <SNIPrf\_man\_frTHIS@xxxxxxxxxx> wrote in message  
<news:1169231862.740594.230750@xx>

A quick glance at the subject line, and I thought you meant Hillary ;-)  
... just caught a chill.

No, clearly I meant Fucked--for--Brains himself.

<http://altnet.org/story/35569>

[Editor's Note: Robert Scheer's new book, *Playing President: My Close Encounters with Nixon, Carter, Bush I, Reagan and Clinton -- and How They Did Not Prepare Me for George W. Bush* (<http://altnet.bookswelike.net/isbn/1933354011>), details his interactions with six presidents in the last three decades. Below are excerpts from Scheer's reflections on Richard Milhouse Nixon and George Walker Bush.]

## RICHARD NIXON'S FROZEN SMILE

Most of the time that I spent in one-on-one interviews with the Presidents in this book occurred while they were still trying out for the role, mostly in the rush of national campaigns for the presidency. As a print journalist, I was granted an access that -- as the candidates' handlers would often remind -- was unwar-ranted by the declining power of the news organizations I represented.

Difficult as it may be for younger generations to imagine, each of these Presidents could remember a time when print media was dominant and television was not to be taken so seriously. Some adjusted more fluidly to the evolving impact of the instantaneous and visual mass media, while others barely ever got it. Television entered the nation's life at different points in these men's political development, and they had varying degrees of familiarity with the medium while growing up. Absent in the youth of Nixon, Carter, and Bush I, but increasingly dominant in the early years of Clinton and George W. Bush, television and its dramatic impact would prove decisive for all. Reagan is an exception in this regard, for while television was

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virtually nonexistent in the formative years of his life, his acting career made him superbly confident on any public stage.

The most reluctant to acknowledge the new television age was Richard Nixon, who, despite being unquestionably the best prepared of all modern Presidents before assuming office, never fully adjusted to the media form, which requires mastering a casual, open, and confident demeanor. This was no small failing, for in the end, whatever one concludes about his performance as President, it was his indelibly awkward and secretive style that did him in. He became the most disgraced of our Presidents, not because of the substance of his performance, but because of its fatally flawed delivery before a national audience.

If not for that failure of style, Nixon would have been able to finesse the Watergate burglary with the ease that all these other Presidents handled crises of far greater international significance. For example, Jimmy Carter's overreaction to a pro-Soviet coup in Afghanistan, which ended up nurturing dangerous Muslim fundamentalists — most notably Osama bin Laden — represents a far greater betrayal of the public trust. So, too, Reagan's Iran Contra scandal and George W. Bush's cooking of the WMD smoke to justify occupying Iraq.

As much as I disagreed with some of Nixon's policies (and my anti-Vietnam War activities resulted in various forms of harassment from his Administration, including a tax audit), I came years later to acknowledge that I had underestimated the accomplishments of his tenure in the White House. That is what led me, in the following essay written for the Los Angeles Times a decade after Nixon was run out of office, to attempt to separate the man's often loathsome style from his at times quite impressive substance. I didn't undertake this reporting assignment for the Times in an effort to rehabilitate Nixon, and certainly not to court the approval of the disgraced President then living in virtual exile in his own country. I knew in advance that my requests for an interview would be turned down, since I had established myself years earlier as one of his most vociferous critics.

It was much to my amazement, then, after sending my published article to Nixon's office as a matter of formality, that I received a letter from the man himself. Given how most of us in this profession struggle so mightily to attain a degree of objectivity, I value Nixon's response to my article as professional praise.

My visit with Nixon after his kind offer to grant me an interview proved to be every bit as awkward as I anticipated. What I recall most is a sort of box-step dance we did as I entered his office: A standing Nixon greeted me with that odd frozen smile of his, just like in all the pictures, appearing to be warmly welcoming me, while actually retreating — causing me to stumble forward with my hand extended.

But no sooner was he seated behind his desk than did the other Nixon appear, the old fox who had mastered world politics. Confident and resolute to a fault, he quickly ticked off facts and theories on any subject I brought up, as if he had a Wikipedia chip implanted in his brain.

I mean, the man was dazzling in his clarity, particularly as he dissected

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the Reagan Administration's obsession with a "Star Wars" missile-defense system. The overall effect was impressively different from what I had expected: In this arena, Nixon was truly at peace with himself.

As for my own view of the Nixon presidency, I stand by the first article reprinted here. My perspective was reinforced while working as a screenwriter (along with my son Christopher) on Oliver Stone's 1995 movie, *Nixon*, which I insisted place considerable emphasis on the former President's achievements — especially the opening to China — while of course visiting the all-too-evident dark side of his Administration. At that time, we had only minimal access to the Nixon White House tapes, but the thousands of hours of recordings made public since then support my earlier assessment of his presidency.

### GEORGE W. BUSH'S PERPETUAL ADOLESCENCE

Let me confess to less confidence in appraising the presidency of George W. Bush than the others discussed in this book. This is not primarily because he is the only one that I did not spend one-on-one time with, although that would have been helpful. But the basic problem for anyone attempting to understand Bush's motivations is that they may not be driven by a recognizable engine.

His charm, which I take to be his most formidable asset, lies largely in his assertion of the prerogatives of perpetual adolescence, in his insistence that we judge him as a well-intentioned screw-up rather than a responsible adult. While this was not a difficult mode for Bush — a coddled offspring of the super rich — as he made his way, heavily escorted, through the failures of his pre-political career, what is astounding is that the "What, me worry?" stance has continued to serve him so well as President of the United States. As opposed to those who preceded him to the highest office in the land, Bush affected a deliberate air of diffidence from an early age, suggesting that he took on assignments only reluctantly, whether as student, businessman, or politician, interpreting each challenge in turn as more of a bother than an obligation. Winging it, but always propped up by a considerable retinue of those more disciplined than he, has proved an enormously effective ploy. There is an often-winning "aw, shucks" mannerism to the man, pursued so determinedly as to hint at a genetic mutation from the model exhibited by his father (and many others driven to succeed).

In contrast with the previous Presidents chronicled in this volume, Bush the younger became an overachiever only after attaining the presidency. The others, and certainly the first President Bush, who more than anyone resolutely built a qualifying resume for the office, presumed that a high level of achievement was required for the world's most important job. These predecessors sweated the details required for the part, beginning with the ability to effectively deliver impromptu remarks in public. On the way up, they learned much from the elders who could take them further.

This was demonstrated most vividly by Ronald Reagan's fawning respect for the rough-hewn Warner Brothers movie moguls who launched and managed his acting career, and by his almost obsequious dependence on the "kitchen

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cabinet" of California millionaires who engineered his rise through the world of campaign politics. Although he was unfairly derided by critics as merely an actor, Reagan's extensive political experience both in Hollywood and in the real world forged a hard drive filled with the minutiae of past struggles and indelibly informed his outlook once in the presidency. Reagan had walked the talk. Like the others (excluding George W.), Reagan was always anxious to advance on the learning curve.

For decades, Richard Nixon served as the ever-eager apprentice to those in a position to advance his career, from Senator Joseph McCarthy to President Dwight Eisenhower, and he meticulously catalogued in his mind the details of every job he worked.

Jimmy Carter portrayed himself as an ordinary peanut farmer, yet he was a well-educated and urbane figure, whose true mentor was the politically skillful Admiral Hyman Rickover; Carter boasted often of the career dues he paid, most notably his experiences as a Navy "nuclear engineer."

Rhodes Scholar Bill Clinton was the perpetual student who made "wonk" his middle name, and George Herbert Walker Bush gave many speeches that drew heavily from his lengthy on-the-job experience. Although Bush I's perspective on his own career may be marked by an arrogant sense of entitlement, he nonetheless had built his resume on impressive performance -- an excellent college student, athlete, and soldier who survived dangerous combat experience -- as opposed to grade-C yell-leading at Yale and part-time National Guard duty spent assiduously avoiding service in an ongoing war.

Yes, the others all practiced to play the part of President and were willing to mold substance to convenience to win the ultimate electoral prize, but once that desperately sought role was attained, they could rely upon their real experiences of a lifetime of hard work to guide their conduct in office. They most decidedly did not arrive at the White House, as did George W., woefully uninformed and unprepared.

Our current White House occupant seemed determined to present his pre-presidency life as a blank slate, conveniently insisting that his years before the age of forty were off-limits since he had been "reborn." But even after that moment of divine intervention, his activities -- for the most part miserably unsuccessful business ventures -- were portrayed as a string of sharp moves in some college MBA game, while his governorship of Texas was offered to and bought by the media as a series of vintage photo ops, with few critical references to actual achievements.

A testing of accomplishment that one would have considered a prerequisite for any mid-level management position became a consideration with Bush only after he had been elected President. Further, his felt moment of empowerment did not even accompany his inauguration to the world's highest political office. Indeed, the first nine months of his rule were marked by a sense of befuddled wonderment that he was indeed playing this role, and, not able to convince himself of his suitability, early polling data suggests he was

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eminently ineffective as the nation's leader.

But then 9/11 happened, and after a day of continued bewilderment, another George W. Bush surfaced. His fans and detractors alike must admit that Bush turned the tragedy of 9/11 into a grand opportunity for his presidency, and in the process recast his image from that of the untested scion of a former President to a bold, if not always wise, leader. The tragic irony in this transformation is that the attacks on the United States in September 2001 likely could have been prevented if Bush had not failed so miserably in recognizing the obvious terrorist danger documented extensively in those daily intelligence briefings during his first nine months in office.

Without any intelligence agencies reporting to me, I, like others, was able to recognize and call attention to the threat of Osama bin Laden — ignored in the Bush Administration's preoccupation with Star Wars and its Faustian antidrug coddling of the Taliban — well before September 11, in my columns of February 14, 2001 and May 23, 2001.

Until bin Laden's minions struck, the Bush presidency had all the earmarks of a failure. Bush was indecisive, lacking in vision, and a craven captive to the special interests that had very early taken full control of his presidential agenda. He was floundering as one born to the manor yet surprisingly unprepared when the family estate fell under his control.

But then the clouds parted, planes became bombs, and there can be no question that Bush quickly seized the moment of national tragedy as a conduit for a quick transformation. In the writings that follow, I leave no doubt of my own view that Bush perverted the 9/11 attacks in ways that left the country less secure, most prominently by shifting focus from bin Laden to the totally unrelated target of Saddam Hussein. Yet as a quick-fix political tactic to save what seemed an already doomed presidency, Bush's maneuvering worked wonders.

Suddenly his presidency was reborn, not through the services of an intervention divine in its authority, but in the powerful ability to manipulate the secular political world. The new religion Bush embraced was in fact the same old reliable one of those seeking greater power in any political system: thundering against the evil of an enemy threatening our security, in the process providing the leader with an unquestionable mandate to do whatever he wants.

The war against evil provides the saving rationale for the Bush presidency, overriding any troubling matters of fact and logic. With the all-powerful enemy of the Kingdom at the gates, is the populace ever to deny the whims or judge clearly the failings of the willful ruler they suddenly discover they so desperately want? Only later, perhaps decades afterward, will there be a time of reckoning.

Robert Scheer is the co-author of *The Five Biggest Lies Bush Told Us About Iraq* (<http://www.alternet.org/fivelies/>). See more of Robert Scheer at TruthDig (<http://truthdig.com/>).

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