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# Leadership by Definition: First Term Reflections on George W. Bush's Political Stance

Stephen Skowronek

George W. Bush elevated the value of definition in presidential leadership and made it central to his political stance. This was as much a strategic calculation of political advantage in the moment at hand as it was a reflection of the man's innate character. Accounting for Bush's leadership posture in this way helps to situate it on a larger historical canvas as a particular rendition of a familiar type; reference to general characteristics of the type facilitates, in turn, an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Bush's performance over the course of his first term. Conclusions consider deviations from the patterned political effects of leadership of this sort and weigh their possible significance.

There are good reasons for caution in evaluating a sitting president. Major initiatives are pending; crucial choices are yet to be made; access is limited; events still hold sway. Arguably, however, certain qualities of leadership are best captured in the moment. One of these is the president's leadership posture, the terms of political engagement he projects to those he intends to move along his chosen course. The principal impression, often the only impression, Americans get of their president is conveyed through this stance. George W. Bush is a president known to evoke intense reactions from friends and foes alike. Perhaps it is because his leadership posture has been so striking and the reactions to it so visceral that little thought has been given to its claims and how they figure in a more general assessment of American national politics. This is the stuff that tends to get lost with time, the sort of thing that grandparents try to convey to grandchildren when conjuring their impressions of a president

long gone. More often than not, they give up in frustration, saying "ya' just had to be there."

One reason for the difficulty is that a president's leadership posture is closely related to other qualities—personal character, governing style, "the times"—that, though ineffable in their own way, serve today as the parlance of leadership studies. No doubt, each has a part to play in determining the political stance a president adopts, and yet a discussion of any one of these factors, or all of them together, will quickly trail off in other directions. The problem is not that we don't have good specifications of these factors or that they don't generate insights into the operations of the American presidency, but that a leadership posture does not readily reduce to them. Thus, when it comes to articulating what we experience most directly in our president, it seems advisable to work the other way around, to consider first what a leadership posture is—its own core attributes—and then circle back to see how related factors contribute to the one currently on display.

A few preliminary reflections may suffice to turn the tables. First, it seems reasonable to assume that a leadership posture is as much a strategic calculation of political advantage in the moment as it is an expression of innate character. Character, as a feature of personality, may place limits on what a given actor can credibly convey on his own behalf, but within those limits, a president's leadership posture is likely to be purposefully constructed with an eye toward leveraging his appeal within the political situation in which he is called upon to act. The stance adopted is a framing device and, as such, far too important an asset to be projected unawares; no astute politician

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will pass up the opportunity to shape context to a chosen identity and to marginalize alternatives. Much the same can be said about governing style: though managerial proclivities, organizational sensibilities, and interpersonal skills are likely to factor in the performance of any executive officer, one can imagine a president with impeccable managerial skills whose weak leadership posture succumbs quite quickly to events. One can also imagine a president whose political stance is so compelling as to limit the fallout from managerial blunders of major proportion. As for the role of “the times,” a president’s answer to the question “what time is it?” would seem to carry as much weight in the construction of his leadership posture as any objective conditions we might discern. To establish a common sense of the times, to say as Lincoln said “where we are and whither we are tending,” is the primal act of leadership and the most politically charged.<sup>1</sup>

All told, then, there does seem to be good reason to think about a president’s leadership posture as something distinct. It is less about what is given in the situation—a man and a set of circumstances—than about what is created in the attempt to seize the moment. Calling attention to this points in turn to what seems to be at the crux of the matter: a leadership posture is, first and foremost, an assertion of political authority. It projects a timely warrant for the exercise of power and bids for deference. The claim of timeliness is central to the legitimacy of what is to be done and of the actor who is to do it, and that means that certain contingencies come built-in to a leader’s political stance. Depending on the terms of the bid and how exactly they interact with ensuing events, a leadership posture may prove an enduring asset, generating resilience over the long haul, or it may become a liability, exposing serious vulnerabilities. For those on the receiving end, it is certain to become a standard of judgment. In looking for the significance of a leadership posture, we should proceed accordingly and examine the way it structures the political contest.

By conveying terms of engagement, a leadership posture will indicate to supporters and opponents alike the political ground to be occupied, the line and manner of the advance, and the larger stakes in play. At the least, we should expect a president’s political stance to be broadly attractive and to provide cover for the interests of powerful allies. In doing both, however, it is also likely to test the patience of allies, alerting them to the adjustments and accommodations they are being called upon to make on their leader’s behalf. To the extent that a president’s



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leadership posture provides assurance on strategic priorities, encourages mutual support, and solicits indulgence for tactical maneuvers, it will facilitate the orchestration of a concerted political change; to the extent that it sets expectations too high or delineates deviation too sharply, it is likely to prove the leader’s undoing. Calling the president’s credentials into question is, of course, what the opposition does instinctively. They will caricature his authority claims, expose his pretensions, find evidence of hypocrisy, advertise the shortfall, and generally try to take advantage of the weaknesses revealed. In all this, however, they labor under the stigma that the president, in his rise to power, has already cast upon them and in full view of his determination to seal his case against them in the exercise of his powers. The upshot is that, more often than not, opponents will use a president’s authority claims as a foil against which to reposition themselves; that is to say, they will turn to values submerged or degraded in the president’s political stance to try to construct an authoritative alternative. Leadership postures may be scrutinized accordingly: we can compare and contrast different political stances, we can draw out their particular authority claims and account for them within a strategic context, we

can identify strengths and vulnerabilities and see how they manifest themselves in the play of events, and we can look to history to identify typical claims, patterned effects, and variations of potential significance.

This article assays the leadership posture George W. Bush adopted during his first term and analyzes its authority claims as an intervention in the national political contest. In the first part I describe the man's political stance and call attention to its more arresting features. In the second, I consider the factors that might account for this stance, and in the third, I seek to situate it in relation to others on a larger historical canvas. In the fourth part, I reflect on how national politics arrayed itself around the president's leadership stance during his first term and what we saw of the strengths and vulnerabilities of its claims on authority. Finally, so far as history allows us to speak to the systemic political effects characteristic of leadership of this type, I speculate about the significance of what we see unfolding in the second term.

## Leadership by Definition

I take my cues in describing this president's leadership posture from his 2000 campaign autobiography, *A Charge to Keep*. In the first lines of the book's foreword, George W. Bush states his precept for political leadership: he vows never to allow himself to be defined by others.<sup>2</sup> The cocky defiance of that opening salvo has long since become familiar. By the same token, one cannot read these lines now without being struck by how well they encapsulate the political stance of this presidency: George W. Bush leads by definition.

I do not mean to ignore the irony that Bush's vow introduced a book that was, in fact, put together by others. Principle responsibility for defining Bush, including the elevated value in this self-presentation of definition per se, lay with ghost writer and campaign aide Karen Hughes. It is precisely because this genre of writing fuses the personal and the strategic in a collective political project, precisely because a campaign biography self-consciously fashions a candidate's life story to maximize his appeal to others, that it can serve as a useful access point to the leadership posture assumed.<sup>3</sup> In this instance, it is also a rare point of access. Bush does not say a lot about himself, at least not on the record, nor is he known as an especially profound thinker. In reading further, however, it turns out that there was a lot more thinking behind Bush's stance than his tart one liner.

*A Charge to Keep* is a treatise on the value of definition in leadership. It not only organizes Bush's life story around a series of "defining moments" but also provides instruction on the high costs of losing definition.<sup>4</sup> Chapter by chapter, the reader discovers that definition has been the central preoccupation of this man's political education. In the early pages, for example, Bush recalls watching un-

ily "as Bill Clinton's catchphrase—'It's the economy, stupid'—became the defining message of the [1992] campaign, even though economists said, and the economy showed, that recovery was underway."<sup>5</sup> Toward the end of the book, that story is repeated: "During the 1988 campaign, my dad was able to define himself. In 1992, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot defined him, and he lost in a long and miserable year."<sup>6</sup> Just a few pages before, the greatness of Ronald Reagan—the man who defeated his father for the Republican presidential nomination in 1980—is traced to his clear and simple assertion of purpose: "His presidency was a defining one."<sup>7</sup> Chapters earlier, we learn that "failure to define the mission" led to the ruin of Lyndon Johnson, and, more important for Bush and his generation, to years of self-doubt and drift in the nation at large.<sup>8</sup>

What is displayed on these pages is an acute sensitivity to the problem of political definition, a view of politics as a struggle for definition, an understanding of leadership as the assertion and control of definitions. This is a man who has pondered the fate of recent leaders and concluded that their success turned on their ability to define themselves and the others around them. This is a man who has come to believe that definitions effectively asserted can create their own reality. The reader of *A Charge to Keep* knows exactly what kind of leader this aspirant intends to be: the kind who lays out terms and upholds them against all comers. Bush's political persona as a man who acts with unflinching resolve on stated purposes follows directly: it was a stance adopted to make him, by definition, a leader.

To be sure, all leaders seek to define themselves one way or another. To set Bush apart as one who has led by definition is to observe something a bit different about him, something that is, to say the very least, an exaggeration of what most others offer. With Bush, definition was not just another attribute of leadership; it was the litmus test of leadership, the signal mark of the genuine article. There was more to it than the sense of a man who was clear about his terms; there was the sense of a man who was wholly self-determined. The charge was not just to identify with a party or a set of national priorities; leadership by definition implied a willingness to stand fully committed up front, fully revealed in one's commitments, and ready to act. Some leaders protect options with subtlety, others acknowledge complexity and prescribe sober intelligence. There was no hedge in Bush's stance: "I don't do nuance."<sup>9</sup>

Definition conveys certainty and self-confidence. The posture is that of a man of set mind, one who knows what to do and leads by doing it. Strength is projected through conviction and validated through persistence.<sup>10</sup> Decision making is inner-directed, predictably contained by preformed standards;<sup>11</sup> the "hard work" lies just beyond that, in "getting the job done."<sup>12</sup> As Bush has shown, one who leads by definition need not be indifferent to the rough and tumble of the political process or stand above the

gritty arts of political maneuver, but enlisting necessary compromises in service to the definition is part of the maneuvering. The president engaged in some serious horse-trading on commitments contained in his education proposal, but that process was itself projected back onto his leadership claims; the education compromise was repeatedly invoked as a marker attesting not only to the president's commitment to a cause long advocated but also to his fabled desire to achieve his goals through bipartisan cooperation. On another front, resistance to the creation of a Department of Homeland Security, Bush capitulated outright, but no sooner was he forced to retreat than he incorporated the department into his list of achievements and made the commitment to it his own. Leadership by definition works to absorb deviation and create in its place a sense of relentless movement forward toward fulfillment of the goal. Each tactical shift is a necessary regrouping in preparation for the next push down the prescribed path; the posture remains intact so long as others sense that the leader's inner compass is still strong and guiding the course. Leadership by definition becomes in this way a driving, multi-front offensive to affirm terms and call forth the corresponding reality.

It is tempting to interpret this as the leadership posture of a hard-line ideologue. There is certainly something of the ideologue in Bush, but the label misses as much as it clarifies,<sup>13</sup> and in so doing, it fails to capture either the challenge or the full potential of his political stance. Consider, for example, the ideological obfuscation of "compassionate conservatism" where a government-friendly social sensitivity, even entitlement, is endorsed alongside a clear reaffirmation of the orthodoxy of the Republican party of our day. The leadership challenge of definition is not to achieve ideological precision; it is to deploy a political persona strong enough to bring order to seemingly incongruous norms, to stabilize the political balance implicit in the program on the strength of the leader's personal convictions. Definition did not make Bush a purist; it made him a stalwart. What it projected was unwavering commitment to stated purposes, a leader completely identified with his cause and thoroughly devoted to its success.

Though the full exposure of one who leads by definition may tempt fate, the potential appeal of such a stance should be self-evident. So long as what is done affirms the leader's priors and displays his avowed identity, authority can be claimed on the basis of authenticity, consistency, and dependability. A man guided in this way by his own internal compass cannot be diverted from the tasks at hand; he will not be distracted by momentary lapses or bumps in the road. He is resolute. Leadership by definition offers an escape from faithless cynicism and political disillusionment; it is refreshingly straight up. As Bush told the nation when accepting his nomination in 2004, "even when we don't agree, at least you know what I believe and

where I stand."<sup>14</sup> The authority he claimed transcended the attractiveness of the particular ambitions he articulated, even the practical effects of their implementation, for, as Vice President Dick Cheney never tired of reminding us, it radiated "clear vision and steady determination."<sup>15</sup>

Equally plain, however, are the potential vices of these virtues, the likely downsides of leading by definition. When conviction drives process, it places severe limits on open engagement with others in a search for solutions, and when real world events are approached as so many opportunities to affirm one's priors, considerations of prudence and plausibility are easily crowded out. As a discipline for leadership, definition will work to narrow options, to lock the leader into his chosen course, to inhibit serious readjustments to unexpected turns and heighten susceptibility to authority-indicting events. That is why definitions start to chase events; that is, to the extent that it becomes costly to alter commitments in the face of evolving circumstances, commitments will simply get reasserted with a new rationale. Herein lies the irony of a leadership stance that scorns pragmatism and flexibility as leadership traits of intrinsic value; these traits reappear as instrumental values in both claiming credit and in shifting justifications for prescribed actions. All this brings the stance to bear on questions of management, elevating the importance of imposing agreement, projecting consistency, and maintaining control, while discounting disconfirming data and discrediting sources of dissent. By purging self-doubt and second guessing, the posture ultimately leaves the leader to scorn accountability and simply insist on the essential correctness of decisions made.

Calling attention to the centrality of definition in Bush's leadership posture makes it easier to understand the strong visceral reactions it has evoked on all sides. It's not so much that the terms themselves were unattractive. Compassionate conservatism cast a wide net, and Bush's overtures to bipartisan cooperation were reassuring. But definition is a stern taskmaster; its set formula bids others either to fall in behind or get out of the way. That raises some interesting questions. Why not a more reserved, less aggressive posture? Why not maximize instead whatever freedom of action the office of the presidency affords? Why would a president want to lead by definition?

## **Factors in Play**

Let me begin with the usual suspects. First, maybe this is just the way it is for leaders today. Bush suggests as much himself when he relates the starkly divergent fates of recent incumbents to their ability to assert and control definitions. The implication is that the challenge of self-definition is becoming sharper for presidents; that it has been heightened so as to trump other values leaders might reasonably want to project or options they would otherwise want to protect. This is a question about our times:

does Bush's leadership stance reflect something of a general nature happening in contemporary American politics; does his example point toward some newly emergent set of circumstances within which all leaders will now have to act?

It is a simple and timeless truth that politicians in a democratic society routinely vie to define one another, that, from the moment they put themselves forward, their political identity is subject to challenge by competitors out to deny them authority. In our time, however, communication technologies have altered the definition game considerably. The mass media have magnified the importance of political images to power seekers, for they virtually guarantee that scrutiny of any image projected will be relentless, ruthless, and national in scope. The twenty-four/seven news broadcasts thrive on controversy and pretense; their continuous editorial commentary dwells on every quirk of personality and inconsistency in action. Add to this the new capabilities which political rivals have gained through the media—capabilities to spin the daily news with alternative messages, rapid responses, poll-sensitive insinuations, targeted appeals, and incendiary but deniable attacks by surrogates. In this new environment, contenders for power cannot assume anything about their political identities; prior acts and political affiliations no longer suffice in projecting a set of leadership credentials. Definition has become something that must be more carefully cultivated, more assiduously protected, more vigorously asserted, more continuously affirmed. All advantage now would seem to lie with the strategically generated political persona, an identity designed to project as much clarity and determination as possible while still holding up against incessant broadsides.

This explanation turns Bush's leadership posture into a model for our times. The man's first instinct—never to allow himself to be defined by others—bespeaks a realist's cold commentary on the hyper-politicized terrain on which American leaders now operate, and his demonstrated penchant for demolishing his opponent's chosen identity while asserting and protecting his own attests to some very timely political skills. Bush did not invent the techniques. Others have selected their audiences to celebrate the message of the day, ignored their critics, covered over their contradictions, strategically updated their explanations, tightly coordinated their rationales, and bludgeoned their challengers. But in showing how a leader can in these ways immunize himself from the risks of media exposure and turn it to his advantage, Bush set a new standard. The edge gained by knowledge of this sort may be indicative of systemic factors now working to envelop presidential leadership in a world of appearance and political fabrication, but it is no less advantageous for that.

I do not, however, think we can rest content with this explanation. What is demanded is mostly tactical talent; exactly how tactics construct a political persona, or what

that persona will be, is largely conjecture. Let us assume that Bush has been more declarative and self-contained in his leadership posture and that the opponents he has defeated were more nuanced and open-ended; this does not mean that subtlety has been ruled out. Bush himself observed that Bill Clinton was very effective in demolishing his father's pretensions while projecting and protecting his own, but Clinton was no stalwart. On the contrary, a few years back we might have thought of the media age as one in which a slick, fuzzy, and emotive image had obviated the need for any conviction at all. There are, in addition, other explanations for Bush's leadership posture that cast serious doubt on its standing as an emblem of our times or a model for the future. At a second and more profound level, this president's determination to lead by definition speaks to questions about his political biography, and the calculations behind that political stance reflect factors as unique and intimate as his life story.

Again, I take my cues from the campaign tract. Bush may have found a lot in the experiences of recent presidents that bolstered his vow never to be defined by others, but he is equally clear that the origins of that vow lie elsewhere. It was, in his telling, a lesson learned of his *own* experience, an instinct ingrained in him by the personal battles he had been forced to fight. As the biography tells it, the definition-imperative was initially brought home to Bush in his first political contest, a failed race for a Texas congressional seat in which a conservative Democrat (Kent Hance) successfully labeled him a boy of privilege, a scion of the old northeastern establishment, an outsider intruding into Texas politics, a carpetbagger. Ann Richards pursued the same line of personal attack against him in his gubernatorial campaign, dubbing him a lightweight cashing in on inherited privileges. Successfully overcoming those labels in that instance launched Bush's meteoric rise.

What is said candidly in those pages about the origins of Bush's thinking about leadership points to all the other biographical issues that elevate definition to central importance in his political advance. It is hardly a stretch to think that Bush and his entourage were alert to the need to counter easy readings of his life's story. Longstanding caricatures had described the man as a shallow and irresponsible fellow; a lost soul without serious interests, driving ambitions, or special talents; a political operative devoid of curiosity about the substance of public policy; a risk taker who entered politics after having succeeded at nothing else, merely to test his skills at another game. If Bush comes across in the campaign biography as curiously earnest in asserting strength through definition—if his repeated invocation of the value of definition as a leadership trait seems to oversell it—it is, at least in part, because the presumptive alternative stalking his political career portrays him as an empty suit. The appeal to definition was, strategically if not psychologically, a response to this problem, an attempt to fill that void. Such a man advances his

leadership authority on the basis of stated purposes and public displays of unwavering commitment to these commitments because there are so few claims to be made on other grounds; substantive referents to other, less risky claims—prior acts of national service, or personal history, or policy expertise, or superior intellectual capacities—were all relatively weak. It is often said that the image of the stalwart works for Bush as a mirror reflection of his former self, that it allows him to surpass the low expectations derived from his past. What remains implicit is the recognition that if not for the assertion of definition—if not for the stalwart stance—then nothing.

But I don't think we can stop here either. The unique features of Bush's life story might go a long way in explaining the elevated role of definition in his leadership posture, but we still don't know why a man adopting that posture rose to prominence so quickly at this particular juncture. The missing pieces of the story—the critical pieces, in my view—are the larger political stakes at issue in Bush's ascendancy, the imminent prospects that made this brand of leadership ripe for these times. This accounting prompts a look beyond the common problems confronted by all recent presidents (the problem of image projection in the media age, for instance) and beyond the personal problems unique to this one individual (the problem of an under-performing past). It asks us to think about "the times" differently, to consider definition as a value that might change from one leader to the next as each reacts to previous leadership efforts and seeks to take account of their political effects. Setting Bush's posture in the sequence of recent leadership efforts—in what I have called "political time"<sup>16</sup>—locates his offer of definition amidst stiffening political cross currents. It reminds us that this was a political stance crafted amidst mounting uncertainties generated by the apostasy of his father, the attractions of Clinton's "Third Way," the failure of Gingrich's hard line, and the yet unfulfilled promises of the Reagan Revolution. Asserting definition and binding oneself to terms emerges here as a solution to the larger political problem at hand, the problem of reviving the conservative insurgency in the wake of some serious setbacks, maneuvering it back into the game, and finally securing its hold on power.

In the year 2000, the core constituency for a leader professing to stand foursquare on stated purposes, for a president seemingly pre-wired to enact a set program and hold steadfast to a governing formula, was frustrated conservatives who longed for fulfillment of the promises of the Reagan Revolution. These people, commonly referred to as "the base," had learned from experience to be suspicious of the Bush family's politics; they hardly needed reminding that W's father had renounced Reaganomics in the 1980 primary campaign or that he had betrayed them in 1990 by renegeing on the defining commitment of his own presidential campaign: "no new taxes." W's campaign biogra-

phy provided the necessary assurances. It cast his political commitments as the home-grown product of Texas conservatism, and as such, much farther removed than his father's from the influence of Connecticut moderation or the penchant of Washington insiders to temporize. As Bush senior was never perceived as fully Texan, Bush junior reveals that he was never quite at home at Andover and Yale; as Bush senior never quite got the "vision thing," Bush junior confesses that he never really felt the attraction of political alternatives. What these pages define is a more reliable Bush, one less internally conflicted than the father, a leader who is by instinct at one with his party's prevailing orthodoxy. A Bush defined in this way might be trusted to follow through where his father had questioned, hesitated and faltered; family loyalties aside, he is a professed true believer whose personal ambitions are fully consonant with the collective work of building a conservative regime, completing the unfinished business of the Reagan insurgency, and consolidating its hold on American government. The title of the campaign biography, *A Charge to Keep*, and the now-famous painting of the horseman with a package traversing difficult terrain that adorns its back cover, captures perfectly Bush's chosen role as an agent of the faithful driven to fulfill the mission, ready to do his part, intent on delivering the goods.

But if Bush's appeal to definition countered party disaffection with his father's administration, it was no less pointed or strategically potent in countering the attractions of Clintonism. Leadership by definition broadened Bush's appeal by deftly exploiting the most serious concerns harbored about the character and politics of the Democratic incumbent in the White House. As a challenger running in unprecedented good times, Bush adopted a leadership posture that zeroed in on something—perhaps the only thing—conspicuously absent in Clinton's stewardship. Implicitly recognizing Clinton's very different claims on authority, Bush inverted them; he played against Clinton's political persona, and turned its caricatured form back upon him. Leadership by definition fed on widespread suspicions that Clinton's words never had any more integrity than the latest poll or focus group, that he was a leader without a compass, that he was a wildcard, a flashy diversion of uncertain value. Definition offered relief from Clinton's moral confusion, feckless character, and official disgrace. Had not this president just parsed the meaning of the word "is" for personal advantage? A stalwart would be incapable of dishonoring the highest office of the land on the whims of the moment. It was this appeal to values missing in Clinton's leadership that made Bush's projection of authenticity and resolve so timely, that took his challenge beyond the base to an otherwise happy and contented people.

The strategic potency of definition as a leadership stance worked prospectively for Bush as well as retrospectively. It targeted the difficulties Vice President Gore faced in

upholding the Clinton legacy while convincing people that he was really, in his phrase, “his own man.”<sup>17</sup> While Gore seemed agitated and compromised by his relationship to Clinton, Bush became the candidate who was “comfortable in his own skin,” the one who had found “the inner peace of self-confidence” in his own political identity.<sup>18</sup> In the latest cycle, the drum beat of charges about Kerry’s “flip-flopping” and “waffling” played with the same devastating effect against Bush’s stalwart constancy and steely resolve.<sup>19</sup> All told, leadership by definition held in its sights the relative state of the two national parties as instruments of governance. In particular, it identified and relentlessly exploited the central weakness of the Democratic party in the post-Reagan era. Bush’s political stance stigmatized all Democrats—Clinton, Gore, Kerry—as politicians unable or unwilling to *define* a clear alternative. Their appeal to nuance, complexity, and pragmatism became, by way of contrast to him, a self-indictment, a revelation of the fact that the real identity of their party no longer stood a robust test of political legitimacy. His claim to definition relegated *them* to obfuscation, to crass instrumentalism, to the overly intellectualized hand-wringing of “no easy answers,” to leadership of a party without a soul.

### **Singular Characters and Typical Claims**

Bush’s leadership by definition advanced claims to authority that resonated in political time. This was not a triumph for strategy over personality, but the strategic deployment of a personality to establish authority, to impart meaning to a moment in history, and to structure its politics. But what kind of politics did it structure? On inspection, Bush’s line of advance was as narrow and demanding as it was clear and full. The operational effect of a fully committed leader is to anticipate great acts of collective fulfillment; indeed, the boundaries of the stance may be marked by the high expectations it generates for the production of a set product. In the balance of its promises, we find a set of pretensions that are, at least on their face, less forgiving than those of other recent incumbents.

Consider Ronald Reagan. Though Bush bid to lead the party of Reagan back to power, he constructed a very different moment in political time. Reagan was an opposition leader taking a radicalized insurgency to power for the first time. His leadership posture was defined by his forthright repudiation of the liberal regime that had been installed in American government during the New Deal and elaborated over the ensuing decades. Moreover, coming as it did at a time when events themselves seemed to be indicting the core commitments of that regime, Reagan’s aggressive stand against liberal mores and policies worked at once to discredit received standards of legitimate national government and to elevate new standards, Reagan’s own

standards, in their place. For this, Reagan was hailed as the “Great Communicator,” but like others who assumed similar stances at parallel moments in political time—for Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and FDR—Reagan was only loosely bound in practice by the new governing standards he was calling forth. Between the rhetorical force of their repudiation of the old order and the legitimacy they are lending their still-inchoate alternative, these “reconstructive leaders” are able to affirm their political authority across a wide range of actions and outcomes.<sup>20</sup> Reagan himself found considerable flexibility in responding to problems as they arose, and he exercised that license with impunity.

Bill Clinton was, if anything, even more free-wheeling. As the first Democrat to hold power in the post-Reagan era, Clinton took his stand against “stale thinking” of all kinds. His political advantage lay in casting aspersions on political identities as they had become fixed in his day and in exploiting the political attractions of an unabashedly mongrel “Third Way.” Like Woodrow “Shifty-Tom” Wilson and Richard “Tricky-Dick” Nixon, “Slick Willy” was a forty-percent victor who avoided forthright repudiations of the regime party even while he taunted it with the prospect of installing a hybrid. His “New” Democratic party—“it’s neither conservative nor liberal; it’s both and it’s different”<sup>21</sup>—was a vehicle all but designed to help him float free. Clinton’s stance did not cut as deeply into received commitments of ideology and interest as Reagan’s (his successful initiatives on NAFTA, crime control, budget balancing and welfare reform seemed far less a departure from received dispensation than a confirmation of it), but it did allow him to range the political spectrum seemingly indifferent to received conceptions of the political alternatives, and like Wilson and Nixon before him, he succeeded brilliantly so long as he avoided the efforts of his opponents to nail him down. To be sure, the elevated value of pragmatism and flexibility in his stance reflected the rather severe constraints imposed on a Democrat by the Republican repudiation of liberalism and its displacement by conservative values; nonetheless, Clinton’s ability to maneuver around both the new conservative orthodoxy and the old liberal orthodoxy drove his opponents to distraction, and it opened the door to something quite different again.

George W. Bush had neither the repudiative authority of a Ronald Reagan nor the mongrel license of a Bill Clinton. In contrast to both of these, he crafted a political stance that renounced flexibility in the name of commitment. Among all the other things to be said about Bush’s leadership posture, perhaps the most important is that his was the stance of a leader affiliated with the regime party, the party that had set the current parameters of American national government. Bush projected that party’s self-confidence, its pretension to speak for the nation’s basic commitments of ideology and interest, its impatient

dismissal of alternative specifications, its insistence on the completion of its work. Leadership by definition tapped the transformative ambitions of a robust party establishment, promising to release its energy and to orchestrate the fulfillment of its ambitions.

And yet, if Bush's stance promised to tap this potential, it also laid down certain conditions for the follow through. His vow never to allow himself to be defined by others did not exclude orthodox Republicans. Since there was no reclaiming the Reagan mantle, no completing the work, without overcoming the interim setbacks caused by his father, by Clinton, and by Gingrich, Bush had to craft a leadership posture all his own. That stance would aggressively embellish the party orthodoxy even while it provided firm assurances of his fidelity to it. If Clinton's challenge was to avoid identification with any orthodoxy at all, the challenge in this case would be to avoid identification with Clintonesque triangulation, and therein lay the great promise of orchestration by a political stalwart.

Consider compassionate conservatism again in this light. It is hardly indifferent to the Reagan orthodoxy: on matters of taxation, defense, regulation, and family values the stand is iron clad. Far from a bid to float free, this was a promise of leadership firmly tied to the base. Just as clearly, however, compassionate conservatism was more than a simple return to orthodoxy. Among other things, Bush has added federally supported education programs, prescription drug entitlements, faith-based welfare provisions, a stepped-up battle against AIDS, and a seemingly progressive initiative to "save" social security. Presumably, orthodoxy was to be the foundation upon which this expansive superstructure would be raised. In this, Bush has not offered a different order of things than Reagan promised; he has suggested the possibility of a higher ordering of those same values. He has set out to show that orthodoxy need not exclude timely new attractions, that it can craft its own solutions to problems as they arise. This is not "Reagan Lite" (as was said of Clinton), or "Reagan's Revenge" (as was said of Gingrich), but "Reagan Plus." For better or worse, the balance of power in Bush's America turns on these distinctions, and they are underwritten largely by his stalwart credentials. Only a stalwart would be trusted with so delicate a balancing act, the act of securing orthodoxy through innovation.

As with Reagan and Clinton, Bush's leadership posture finds clear echoes in America's past. This one recurs in political time too; in its strategic elements and its construction of national politics, Bush's stance was of a piece with several others. The broader significance of Bush's political leadership is, I think, best assessed by thinking about him in this way, as the latest in a long line of "orthodox innovators" in American presidential history.<sup>22</sup> Coming to power at parallel junctures in the development of earlier political regimes, America's orthodox innovators have all tackled the same basic leadership challenge: they need

to deliver the goods to the faithful while putting a fresh face on the faith, to redeem old promises while responding to the demand for something new, to uphold consistency and integrity while changing the game plan for a new day. Accordingly, all efforts at orthodox innovation beg the same basic question: how much extra weight will the foundations bear?

There is no denying that Bush gave this leadership stance his own special twist. Presidents rise to these occasions by their own lights. I would simply note that of all the leadership projects that recur in presidential history, orthodox-innovation is—for reasons internal to the project itself—the one that finds the leader most insistent on setting terms up front and gaining agreement on definitions. It is the one that ties the president most closely to mutual consent among the faithful, pre-programmed understandings, and set formulas for action. After all, orthodox innovation is an oxymoron. These leaders are left to reconcile within their own political personas—through their own terms and definitions, if you will—a leadership charge at odds with itself. Between the promise of securing the foundations and the promise of raising an attractive new superstructure, the orthodox innovator risks becoming swamped by charges of betrayal from within his own church and plunging his faithful followers headlong into sectarian warfare.

## **Strengths and Vulnerabilities**

Looking back over the course of American political history, it is notable that the most formidable of America's orthodox innovators have been, like George W. Bush, second generation affiliates. It may be recalled that Bush senior also spoke of compassionate conservatism.<sup>23</sup> But coming directly on the heels of Reagan's reconstructive rhetoric, that slogan sounded like a veiled critique of the new orthodoxy, and it struck many at that time as a failure of vision. It takes a while, perhaps even an interim defeat, before the promise of innovation appears to bolster rather than threaten the cause and the attractions of a second-order synthesis become clear.

The second generation affiliates have grown up with the new dispensation, and this is reflected in their stance as true believers poised to make the great leap forward on the received faith. Think of James Polk, "Young Hickory," who fused the old Jacksonian orthodoxy to a heady program of Manifest Destiny; of Theodore Roosevelt, the boy who watched Lincoln's funeral procession from his grandfather's balcony and determined to redeem the "bloody shirt" of the Civil War in a "New Nationalism;" of Lyndon Johnson, the youthful New Dealer who referred to FDR as his "daddy" and promised to advance mid-century liberalism to the Great Society. These were all muscle-flexing presidents, impatient to complete the work of their predecessors and usher the nation into their promised land. Each brought to bear on events at home and

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abroad the same determination to follow through and get the job done. W's can-do verve and bravado captured the spirit of these faithful sons, leaders who knew exactly where they wanted to lead because they knew precisely where they came from.

Against this comparison set, we may begin to appreciate just what a remarkable exemplar of this type George W. Bush has been. Most arresting were his responses to the extraordinary events that punctuated his first term. Orthodox innovators begin with a full plate, with bold claims and high expectations, and with a delicate balance among commitments old and new. Their characteristic management style is to insist on tight control from the center, for the only way to hold all their commitments together long enough to deliver sufficiently on each is to closely orchestrate the action from above. Happenstance is surely a source of high anxiety for these presidents; as everyone knows, nothing derails an intricate plan like an unexpected event.

The contested election of 2000 and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were events of this sort. We call them "defining moments," and for a president not so thoroughly defined up front, they might have been just that. For Bush, however, the matter was more complicated. Neither of these events resonated very well with the promise of completing the work of the past. Each was an unexpected national trauma so far afield of either party's story line as to jolt national politics free of familiar modes of thinking and pre-wired lines of action. Few leaders are given any opportunity to set aside the baggage of commitments and expectations that they carry into office and define the situation anew; this president was presented with two such opportunities. What is remarkable is that in both instances he met extraordinary events with bags in hand, repaired to the pending agenda, and followed through on old business. Never has a leadership posture so at odds with the contingencies thrust upon it been employed so aggressively in the cause of creating its own reality. Events would not define George W. Bush; he would define them.

This had real effects. Consider the paradoxical character of the play of events on Bush's leadership posture: an event that dealt him a weak hand exposed latent strengths in his leadership stance; an event that strengthened his hand exposed latent weaknesses. In refusing the first invitation to discard the preformed response—that presented by the contested election—Bush showed where the orthodox innovator's potency really lies. Fulfilling the terms of a precast definition turned out to be an unexpectedly effective way of creating something out of nothing. The electorate had not only failed to provide a mandate, it had indicated a marginal preference for Bush's opponent and ushered in a constitutional crisis over the succession. And yet, in the face of calls for the creation of a government of national unity, Bush assembled a team committed to his stated program and methodically went about the business

of enacting it. More remarkable still, his no-holds-barred offensive failed to provoke his seemingly powerful and testy opposition to an immediate and crushing reaction.

In part, Bush was demonstrating just how little the Clinton interregnum had done to define a compelling alternative around which the Democrats could rally the nation and resist. Even more than John Kennedy, whose call to "get the country moving again" was meant to stigmatize the Eisenhower years as a holding action in the larger narrative of liberalism's advance, Bush's opening drive exposed the hollow core at the heart of the Democrats' electoral clout. Challenging the president on policy details, Democrats tacitly accepted the terms of his leadership. They removed school vouchers from the president's education bill, but left him the dual champion of performance testing and structural revisions of the tax code.

For those who did complain in those early months that Bush was acting to transform the polity in decisive ways without any political authority to do so, there was a tart reply: "He's doing exactly what he said he would do."<sup>24</sup> The mandate was lodged in the definition. The man had laid out his terms, and he was acting in a way that was consistent and true to them. The full significance of those early months lay in showing that the authority of an orthodox innovator does not rest solely on vote margins, that his is the authority of the nation's only clear political standard. Election returns notwithstanding, Bush had something to stand on, and it's hard to resist something with nothing.

But if repairing to previous commitments proved a source of political strength at a time when the president held a relatively weak hand, repairing to previous commitments in the aftermath of 9/11—when the president found himself suddenly thrust into an unassailable leadership position—exposed some serious political vulnerabilities. The terrorist attacks all but transformed the foundations of this president's political authority, pushing it beyond programmatic and partisan concerns and lodging it on the firmest ground of all: the constitutional responsibility of the president to preserve, protect, and defend. This was not only a rare moment of national unity; it was, for all appearances, a Lincolnian moment, one in which all Americans were being called upon to "disenthral" themselves, to discard "the dogmas of the quiet past," to "think anew and act anew."<sup>25</sup> In the days immediately following the attacks it was widely proclaimed that "everything had changed," that the people and their leaders would now have to move in "an entirely different world."<sup>26</sup> Administration intimates indicated that the president had recalibrated his resolve accordingly, that George W. Bush was ready to act on a wholly new understanding of what his presidency was all about.<sup>27</sup>

Resolve was, of course, a leadership value that Bush had been carefully cultivating all along. It was the purity of the occasion now calling for its display that presented the

difficulties. The rub came just after the administration's initial foray into Afghanistan, when the president equated the war on terror with a turn to Iraq. This, Bush's single most forceful assertion of leadership by definition, drew heavily on the commanding authority bequeathed to him to prevent another attack, and in so doing, it drew him out on a clear set of refutable propositions. To make the case, the administration had to press inferences, assert linkages, stretch for evidence, and manipulate key terms. That was risky, and only the least of it.

All leaders place themselves at risk, especially the great ones. In this instance, the president was risking the nation's confidence that the attacks had in fact dispelled old conceits and that he himself was acting with eyes unfettered by prior assumptions. The alternative possibility—that Bush's understanding of himself as a leader had not changed after all, that America's approach to this “new world” was being driven by a president still eager to make good on old assumptions—lingered in the knowledge that regime change in Iraq had long been part of the political agenda of Vice President Cheney and key administration advisors in the Defense Department. Skeptics at home and abroad feared that the president was instinctively grasping hold of the pet project of his party's neoconservative wing and using the mandate to crush terrorism to finish up some politically awkward business left behind by his father's administration.

When the invasion failed to support the case built for it, Bush's reputation as a political stalwart came back to haunt him. Moreover, in the ensuing scramble to revise the rationale for the invasion, rivals were reminded of the administration's changing explanations for its commitment to tax cuts and were ready to define a pattern that would put his entire administration in a harsh new light. Charges of dogmatism, arrogance, duplicity, and recklessness in the use of national power ate into what should have been the impregnable authority of the nation's protector. All the administration could do from then on was try to limit the damage that Bush, the political stalwart, had done to Bush, the nation's stalwart.

Was the Iraq imbroglio just a case of bad intelligence? Perhaps. It is notable, however, that orthodox innovators are chronically driven to dubious, high-risk wagers of this sort. We know that Polk manipulated events on the Mexican border to instigate a war of conquest in the greater southwest; we know that LBJ grasped hold of shaky evidence of events in the Gulf of Tonkin to commit the nation to war in Vietnam. What may appear in isolation as a bit of bad luck for Bush fits this larger pattern of overreaching by orthodox innovators: leaders defined by their political commitments, caught up in their own pre-suppositions, determined to deliver the goods.

Lincoln, speaking at the moment when he had grasped both a political victory (abolishing slavery) and a military victory (ending the threat of national disintegration), made his famous confession that he had not controlled events

but that events had controlled him.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, orthodox innovators are loath to let events point the way and simply move with the situation as it develops. Their authority is not so flexible or open-ended; Lincoln's enigmatic resolve—“my policy is to have no policy”—is a luxury they can ill afford.<sup>29</sup> It is telling in this regard that George Bush made “preemption” his watchword in the war on terror. Preemption was a way of getting out ahead of events, defining them, and orchestrating their unfolding. Preemption allowed Bush to stipulate the terms of this war, to redirect its action, to make it a fight of his own choosing. Orthodox innovators are driven by this impulse to try to maximize control up front, and it is precisely that which puts them at greatest risk. By forcing events, they saddle themselves with a challenge of event-engineering that can quickly become superhuman in its proportions.

## **Patterns and Prospects**

Orthodox innovators are not often elected twice, so Bush's victory in 2004 calls for some careful reflection on the systemic political effects historically associated with leadership efforts of this type and on how they square—or fail to square—with what has happened so far in the case at hand. All presidents change American politics, but rarely do they change it even roughly in the manner they intend. Orthodox innovators uniformly intend to broaden the appeal of the dominant regime, to secure its hold on governing by demonstrating that theirs is really, in Lyndon Johnson's words, “a party for all Americans.” Bush's self-proclaimed role as “a uniter not a divider,” his insistence on a polyglot display of speakers at his nominating conventions, his bid to make conservatism more “compassionate,” all echo that characteristic promise. Historically, however, these efforts have tended to produce something quite the opposite. Orthodox innovators characteristically leave behind a political regime overburdened with responsibilities, ideologically distended, and tumbling into disarray. Paradoxically, they take robust governing parties, parties ripe with solutions to the problems of the day, and unwittingly send them spinning in sectarian warfare.

In short order, the stalwart Polk, nationally celebrated in 1844 as “consistent, orthodox and true,” was being denounced as Polk-the-Mendacious, a devious manipulator of the interests he had promised to serve. Or consider Lyndon Johnson: no sooner did it become clear that he could not deliver on his leadership formula as promised—that he could not bring about the Great Society at home while defending Vietnam—then his presidency collapsed in a tidal wave of recriminations. The typical political effect of orthodox innovators—especially the strongest of them—has been, in a word, schismatic. Even the less personally tarnished Theodore Roosevelt left office with the progressive and old-guard factions of his party at his, and each other's, throats.

The reason for this boils down to the fact that the political world seldom conforms to definitions and formulas; no matter how tight, skilled, or hands-on the controls exerted, events can be orchestrated to set terms only for so long. With so many competing commitments so precariously balanced against one another, the orthodox innovator sets in motion a program that sooner or later begins to run at the mercy of events. For these high rollers, everything has to break the right way. TR, whose fusion of progressive reforms and old-guard commitments thrived on what he called the “pulse of prosperity,” watched his synthesis disintegrate in the brief economic panic of 1907.

When things did finally go awry, these leaders found that they had no good response to those among their own followers who, for various reasons of their own, stepped forward to say that they mishandled, misinterpreted, or betrayed their faith. That is what Johnson called “the Bobby problem”—referring to the rising threat of an internal challenge to his authority from Bobby Kennedy; that was what Polk knew as the Van Buren problem; that is what Theodore Roosevelt experienced as an Aldrich problem and a LaFollette problem; that is what Bush senior faced as the Buchanan problem. For all their muscle flexing and all their programmatic achievements, these presidents are tied to a collective project and responsible for it; they are ministers to the faithful who have little authority without the full-throated support of the church. In fact, the more the orthodox innovator does, the more vigorously he exercises the independent powers of his office and personalizes his rendition of the faith, the more vulnerable to these charges of betrayal he is likely to become. That is how some of our greatest orthodox innovators became so quickly isolated; victims of their own grand schemes, they began to appear to others dangerously out of touch with reality and lacking in credibility.

The point to emphasize in all this is that episodes of orthodox innovation characteristically collapse in upon themselves, that historically speaking, squabbling among the faithful over the true meaning of orthodoxy and assaults on the president from within the ranks have been far more effective than direct challenges from the opposition in breaking up a dominant party. When these leaders are brought down, it is seldom because the opposition has pressed a frontal assault on established governing commitments or offered a sharp alternative to the dominant agenda; it is almost always because the president’s own definitions and formulas—his terms for holding the faithful together and securing their power—have proven too delicate to survive the rough and tumble of an unruly world.

We saw a bit of the characteristic fallout from orthodox innovation during the early months of the current administration when Republican Senator Jim Jeffords of Vermont rejected the president’s rendition of his commitments, announced his decision to leave the party, and, in the process, shook the political foundations of the Bush admin-

istration. One suspects that were it not for 9/11, the course of this administration, like that of Polk, TR, Johnson, and Bush senior would likely have been marked by more of the same, a rising tide of sectarian infighting over the true meaning of the faith. With the attacks, however, the Republicans closed ranks, and what is more remarkable, they stuck together. More than anything else, that is what sealed John Kerry’s defeat. There was certainly no lack of material for mounting an internal assault charging that this administration had betrayed fundamentals, distorted the party’s true identity, or placed its future at risk. But no one of significance stood up to lead the charge.

Whatever might be said of the weaknesses of the Kerry campaign, it is not the case that he failed to try to leverage Republican discontent. In the first campaign debate, an event that is widely acknowledged to have made the president’s reelection a real contest, the challenger sidestepped the kind of personal attacks that might cause Republicans to rally behind their leader and offered instead a diagnosis of the risks inherent in the president’s leadership posture:

We do have differences. I’m not going to talk about a difference of character. I don’t think that’s my job or my business. But let me talk about something that the president just sort of finished up with. Maybe someone would call it a character trait, maybe somebody wouldn’t. But this issue of certainty. It’s one thing to be certain, but you can be certain and be wrong. It’s another to be certain and be right, or to be certain and be moving in the right direction, or be certain about a principle and then learn new facts and take those new facts and put them to use in order to change and get your policy right. What I worry about with the president is that he’s not acknowledging what’s on the ground.

Lighting on the pretense of certainty, Kerry tapped a general unease. The issue, he implied, was not whether the president was a good or likeable man nor was it that he was too conservative; the issue was a dangerously misguided understanding of what makes a leader strong. In that moment at least, Kerry was not trying to outdo the president in a display of stalwart resolve; all the same, he was taking his case directly onto the president’s turf. He was holding himself out as the stronger leader for his ability to deal realistically with “what’s on the ground,” for his willingness to adjust, for his wariness of becoming blinded by things as he wished them to be. The momentum Kerry gained from that critique carried him back from the abyss. For failing to rattle the Republican establishment, however, it left him short of the mark.

Pressing the perspective of political time for the pivotal figure in all this, the one on whom Bush’s reelection really turned, the person who stands out from all others is John McCain. Bush’s McCain problem was legion, and uncannily parallel to LBJ’s “Bobby problem” and Polk’s “Van Buren problem.” Like Kennedy and Van Buren, McCain was a leader of national reputation who possessed both the authority and apparent motive to say that his president had gotten it wrong, to deny the leader’s authority by

calling his administration to account to its own party. Repeatedly, throughout American history, leaders like McCain have found it in their own political interest to subject our orthodox innovators to the American equivalent of a no-confidence vote and to strip their pretensions bare. A personal trashing by the Bush campaign in the 2000 primaries made McCain ripe for that role, and his taunting actions over the course of the first term seemed calibrated to keep the option open. It was probably too much to expect McCain to accept Kerry's invitation to join him on a national unity ticket, but that invitation did make plain McCain's significance, his capacity to determine the future of the Bush administration. When instead McCain offered hugs to the chief—awkward and grudging as they seemed to be—the tale was told.

So here things sit. No great schism, but no great swing behind the president's grand synthesis either. New rumblings of discontent from Republican moderates; signals of rank and file discomfort on appointments, deficits, social security, and immigration reform; worries about endemic second term weaknesses, definition-indicting events in New Orleans—all this is, at this writing, the stuff of much speculation.<sup>30</sup> But just as current is speculation that events might break the president's way after all in Iraq, or that, freed from reelection pressure, he might make some strategic adjustments in his basic leadership posture. There is little sense in reaching too far ahead of the situation as it stands less than a year into the second term. If there is something that remains to be addressed, it is the unusual extension of party unity that has already accompanied this aggressive exercise of orthodox innovation. Let me briefly consider three explanations and their implications.

The most straightforward, common sense explanation is that Bush's renewed lease on leadership was a lingering effect of the 9/11 trauma and rally, that for all the fallout from the Iraq invasion, his presidency benefited on balance from the pervasive sense of crisis instilled by the attacks and the general reluctance of people to depose their commander in chief in wartime. This apparently is John Kerry's own explanation.<sup>31</sup> With issues of internal and international security at the forefront of events and troops in the field, the recent campaign was fought on what has traditionally been the sitting president's strongest turf, and for every insinuation that the president had deluded the nation and embraced "the wrong war", there was a reminder of the imminent threat, the ongoing fact of war, and the residual value of a leader who had all along fashioned himself a stalwart. If this is the explanation, then the president was indeed fortunate that the two most disgruntled national leaders to be found within his party, Colin Powell and John McCain, also prided themselves on being good soldiers. The outstanding question raised by this explanation is whether the implosive effects more typically associated with an orthodox innovator in the White House were durably altered by these intrusive events

or merely forestalled. With political rumblings again suggestive of rising schismatic pressures, perhaps the most important thing to say in this regard is that caution is embedded in the explanation itself: who is to say that the traumatic events of the Bush years are all in the past?

An explanation even more suggestive of a delayed effect looks to prior experience under Republican party government. There is some reason to think that divisions and resentments are simply slower to come to a boil among Republicans than among Democrats. Call this the McKinley explanation. Until November 2004, William McKinley was the only orthodox innovator of either party to be elected twice in unencumbered contests between Democrats and Republicans.<sup>32</sup> (Grant, another orthodox innovator and another Republican, was also elected twice, but with much of his opposition still under force of arms.) It is a commonplace of American politics that the Republican party and the Democratic party were put together somewhat differently from the get-go, that the former has always been a bit less dispersed as a coalition of interests and a bit more coherent in its general purposes. Ronald Reagan's 11th commandment—thou shall not speak ill of a fellow Republican—affirms both faith in this fact and knowledge of its limits. That there are limits—that this greater capacity to forestall implosion in the face of schismatic pressures is only relative—is indicated by the plight of Bush senior in the midst of what would otherwise seem a remarkably advantageous turn of events. Having taken over a party already eight years under the thumb of a Republican president, he found that fighting a tidy little war of his own, a war even more masterfully won than McKinley's, was not enough to hold things together. The first-term success of Bush junior, following a Democratic interregnum of eight years, might seem a bit less remarkable on this accounting. What appears today like skillful defiance of the implosive political effects of orthodox innovation may be just a matter of the Republicans' relatively slow-ticking clock.

The third explanation cuts the other way. It is that the Republican party under George W. Bush has become something very different from the party of McKinley, that it is, in fact, an organization unique in American political history. It seems safe to say that America has never seen a party that combined this level of ideologically solidarity with political competitiveness in all sections of the country. Moreover, this party is reputed to have developed capacities for central direction, national reach, inter-branch coordination, candidate recruitment, and local surveillance that dwarf those of prior organizations.<sup>33</sup> We had occasion to remark on similar and related capacities in considering this administration's savvy in harnessing the modern media to its purposes, using it with remarkable success to manipulate images, update arguments, and disseminate messages. One likely effect of secular innovations of this sort would be to limit the appeal of strategies

previously open to internal challengers. What was once a reasonable way for them to assert their influence within the ranks and call their party back from its leader's missteps, may now with good reason be perceived as a certain act of political suicide. In retrospect, we may look back to McCain's refusal to step forward as signaling the historic foreclosure of this once potent political option.

In successive iterations of my work on presidential leadership in political time, I have been on the lookout for secular changes that might serve to wash out the old types, obviate their patterned effects, and cause political time to wane.<sup>34</sup> The thickening of American national government over the course of the twentieth century—the expansion, proliferation, and growing resilience of its parts—has always struck me as the most likely factor, especially as it was accompanied at the start of the century by a weakening of the traditional party organizations. The late-breaking appearance of a full bodied exemplar of orthodox innovation in the figure of George W. Bush is a bit problematic for this line of reasoning, though perhaps not so much as one might at first think. After all, the strong resurgence of party in recent years has been driven in large part by agitation over the legitimacy of “big government” and by an incessant battering against its parts. If a thickened national government was clogging old mechanisms over the course of the twentieth century, it is less than a total surprise that party-inspired challenges to such thickening late in the century might have kicked things back into gear. Of greater interest today is secular change of a different sort: what if the vehicle for this resurgence is a new kind of party, a party geared specifically for a more continuous adjustment of its ideological and programmatic profile to its president's chosen course?

Herein lies another avenue of departure from the characteristic political effects associated with the leadership postures we recurrently observe in American history. These new organizations would be far more formidable as tools of presidential governance than the old parties. The party would in effect become whatever the president needs it to be, and whatever capacity it had to hold its leaders to account would accordingly be lost. This is hardly a sure thing, and we should be especially wary of it in the face of current portents of Republican discontent. Still, in thinking about what this still-unfolding episode might have to tell us about the emergent state of the American polity overall, this is surely the most original and weighty prospect. If it were borne out, the historic constraints imposed on presidential leadership by political time would be substantially dissipated, and leadership by definition would mark something far more significant than a clever run down a familiar gauntlet.

## Notes

1 Lincoln 1953, 2: 461–68.

2 Bush 1999, ix.

3 In calling attention to the Bush's campaign biography as a portent of his leadership posture in office, I am broaching the much discussed collapse in recent years of the distinction between campaigning and governing. See for example Ornstein and Mann 2000. I am not saying that campaign tracts are always so revealing, though it might be interesting to see whether they have over time become better indicators of postures assumed in government. In the next section, I suggest why in this case, the biography became such a good guide to the president's political posture in office.

4 Bush 1999, 1.

5 *Ibid.*, 4.

6 *Ibid.*, 184.

7 *Ibid.*, 177.

8 *Ibid.*, 55.

9 Greenfield et al. 2001; Klein 2004.

10 A different but insightful assessment of conviction as a foundation for leadership is found in Sykes 2000.

11 There are, however, striking moments in which Bush insists on explaining the labored thought processes that went into a decision. One example of this in the campaign biography is his extended discussion of the different decisions he made as governor in death penalty cases. Another perhaps not unrelated example from his presidency was his treatment of his decision over stem cell research. Before setting out his terms and conditions, the President went out of his way to elaborate publicly on the wide-range of opinions he had sought out and the difficulty of sorting through them. In both cases, the revelation was of a leader who is determined to remain true to himself in the face of a difficult issue. As Henry Clay said of James Monroe's disquisition laying out his studied opposition to federal support for internal improvements, the president did not invite discussion but simply revealed the ruminations of his own mind. See Bush 2001.

12 The phrase was used throughout the first term and picked up by observers during the last campaign. See Pickler and Lindlaw 2004.

13 Brooks 2004.

14 Bush 2004.

15 For example, Niquette 2004; Cheney 2004a; Craig and Sandalow 2004; Cheney 2004b; Craig 2004.

16 Skowronek 1984, 1993.

17 Gore 2000; see also, for example, Allen 2000; Enda 2000; Barstow 2000; Shribman 2000.

18 For example, Edwards 2001; Roberts and Roberts 2000.

19 For example, Halbfinger 2004.

20 Skowronek 1993.

21 For example, Toner 1991.

22 Skowronek 1993.

23 For example, Birnbaum 1988; Mashek 1988; Roberts 1989; Seib and Davidson 1988; Rice 1990.

- 24 Senator Robert Bennett, for example, said on CNN's Crossfire in March 2001, "In fact, Bush is doing exactly what he said he would do in the campaign. Nobody should be surprised." Even Former President Bill Clinton said in May 2001 that "The messages were always there, no one was reading between the lines. He's doing exactly what he said he was going to do" (Berke 2001). Ari Fleischer, White House Press Secretary, said on April 30, 2001: "The President is doing exactly what he promised and said he would do on the campaign, and he is moving forward with the development of the missile defense system that he'll outline tomorrow." And on February 9, 2001 regarding Bush's defense plan that "displeased" the military establishment, Fleischer said: "The President said help is on the way, and help is on the way. And the help will be delivered in the manner exactly as the President said during the campaign." See also Reed 2001: "I couldn't believe such garbage against the man, a man who is doing what he said he was going to do, not just politics as usual. He is an honest man and a good man, and he is a man for the people." And also Hatton 2001: "I couldn't be happier with President Bush. He is doing exactly what he said he would do. He is working to lower the onerous tax burden, he has brought rationality and moderation to the process of cleaning up the environment, and he is working to ensure that our energy needs will be met."
- 25 Lincoln, 1953, 5:537.
- 26 For example, Lewis 2001.
- 27 For example, Bush family friend Brent Scowcroft described George W. Bush in the aftermath of the attacks as "a president who has seized on this crisis and sees this as his mission . . . He's been transformed" (Keen 2001; see also Beattie 2002; Milbank 2003; Fineman 2003).
- 28 Lincoln 1953, 7: 281.
- 29 Donald 1995, 332.
- 30 For example, Murray and Allen 2005; Brownstein 2005; Nagourney 2005; Harwood 2005.
- 31 Kerry 2005.
- 32 This historical distinction may be implicated in the fact that Bush strategist Karl Rove likes to invoke McKinley as a model of Republican success. For example, Purdum and Kirkpatrick 2004; Rios 2003; Green and Schickler 2002; Dionne 2002.
- 33 For example, Economist 2005; Hamburger 2005; Bass 2004; Brownstein 2004.
- 34 For example, Skowronek 1993; Skowronek 1996; Skowronek 1998; Skowronek 2001.
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