
Bush's Legacy

Author(s): David Frum

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By David Frum

BUSH'S LEGACY

He may be the most unpopular president in modern times: a reckless, unilateralist cowboy. But history will be kinder to George W. Bush than contemporary caricatures. After eight years, he leaves behind much more than a defeated dictator in Iraq. Closer ties to India, a pragmatic relationship with China, and the pressure he applied to Iran will pay dividends for years to come.

"Iraq Is Bush's Only Foreign-Policy Legacy"

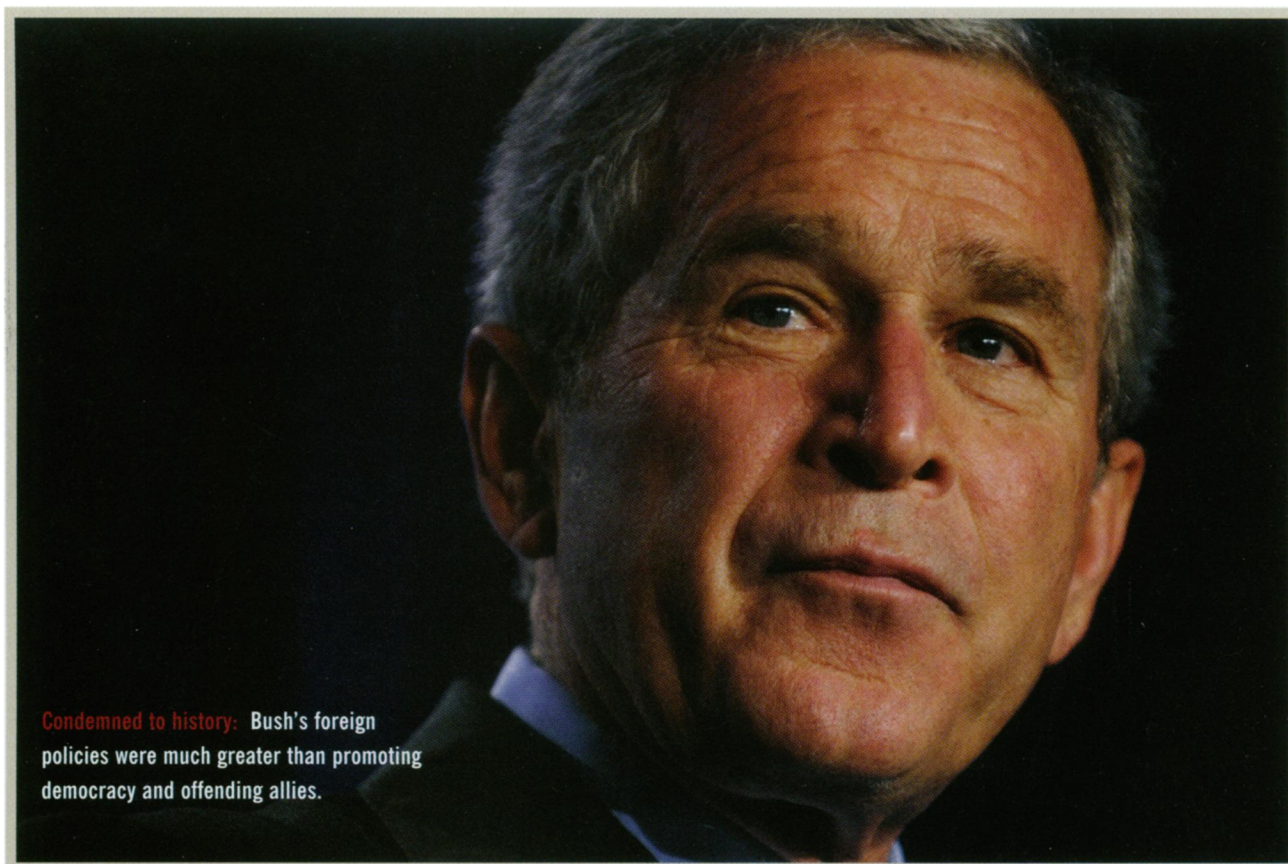
Hardly. There's no denying that the war in Iraq has defined the presidency of George W. Bush in important ways. But history is unlikely to remember the war as negatively as most assume.

It's now likely that the war will stagger to an inconclusive ending. The insurgency will shrink but not disappear. The government will function but will be divided. The U.S. military presence will be reduced but not entirely withdrawn. And Iraq's neighbors will be bruised but their geopolitical policies will stay intact. Yet, by overthrowing Saddam Hussein and replacing him with a nonaggressive, albeit weak, elected regime, the United States will have achieved a real improvement in the region. It will have come at a high cost in money and lives. But it will also falsify the worst predictions of the war's opponents. As the Iraq war recedes into history, it will come to be seen more like the frustrating Korean conflict, or the Philippine insurrection, rather than the debacle of Vietnam. It will be an important part of Bush's legacy, but hardly all-defining.

*David Frum, a former speechwriter and special assistant to President George W. Bush, is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and author of *Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).*

As time passes, other crucial decisions of the Bush years will come into sharper focus. Among the most important will be the formation of a U.S.-India military alliance. Under Bush, the United States and India (along with Australia, Japan, and Singapore) have begun joint naval exercises. The United States and India signed a treaty to share nuclear materials in 2007. The United States is offering India fighter planes, warships, and other equipment sales that could total as much as \$100 billion during the next 10 years. Otto von Bismarck once famously predicted that the most important geopolitical fact of the 20th century would be that the United States and Britain spoke the same language. Now, the values shared by the United States and India may emerge as the most important geopolitical fact of this century.

Other foreign-policy legacies of the Bush years include the signing of new bilateral trade agreements, the world's first convention on cybercrime, the wise decision to give Hugo Chávez enough rope to hang himself, and the continued successful management of the U.S.-China relationship. Conversely, if Iran is allowed to follow North Korea into the nuclear weapons club, it could well be the failure to act against the other two thirds of the "axis of evil," not the willingness to act in Iraq, that will be regarded as the most important decision of the Bush years.



“The Iraq War Has Made America Less Safe”

Prove it. In the two decades leading up to Bush’s presidency, the United States and its allies were struck by a rising number of increasingly ambitious, aggressive, and deadly terrorist attacks. The hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985. The Berlin disco bombing in 1986. The Buenos Aires bombings in 1992 and 1994. The assassination of Kurdish exiles in Berlin in 1992. The World Trade Center bombing in 1993. The Paris subway bombings in 1995. The plots to attack New York monuments and Pacific Ocean jetliners in 1995. The Khobar Towers bombing in 1996. The East Africa embassy bombings in 1998. The USS Cole in 2000. 9/11.

Now compare that with the period since the invasion of Iraq. Since 2003, former state sponsors of terrorism have behaved much more cautiously. Libya, for instance, has retired from the business altogether. Where terrorism has existed outside the Middle East, it has steadily declined in both effectiveness and sophistication. The Madrid

bombing of 2004 was less sophisticated than 9/11. The London subway bombings in 2005 were less sophisticated than Madrid. And the plots foiled in Germany, in Canada, and at Heathrow Airport in the summer of 2006 were all less sophisticated than the London bombings.

The U.S. homeland has enjoyed almost complete immunity from acts of international terrorism, and the plots that have come to light have been reassuringly amateurish in their conception and attempted execution. Even in the Islamic heartland, terrorism is waning. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s attack on a wedding at a Jordanian hotel in 2005 soured Arab Middle Easterners on the al Qaeda movement. Al Qaeda’s commanders in Iraq have publicly acknowledged that their bloodthirsty tactics have alienated local residents—and left their movement in dire straits. It would be absurd to attribute this improving trend line solely to President Bush. But it would be equally absurd to deny that things are improving.

“Bush Has Wrecked America’s Alliances”

Wrong. Yes, the Western alliance system is in trouble. But it was in trouble well before Bush. NATO’s tensions, for instance, were already noticeable during the Balkan crisis in the late 1990s. And remember that President Bush was met with mass protests on his first European trip in the summer of 2001—before either 9/11 or the war in Iraq. Among the issues irking the United States’ allies then was Bush’s decision not to stay the execution of Timothy McVeigh, the terrorist who killed 168 Americans by detonating a truck bomb outside the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995. It would be far more accurate to say that American unilateralism is a symptom of alliance troubles rather than a cause.

Many have argued that the Bush administration somehow squandered Europe’s goodwill toward America by going it alone in Iraq. Not so. Polls conducted in the weeks after 9/11, well before the Iraq war, showed that only about one sixth to one quarter of Europeans supported the use of force against state sponsors of terrorism. That did not prevent NATO from approving the mission in Afghanistan—the first conflict approved under Article 5 of the NATO charter. It has, however, made it difficult to gain serious commitments for NATO troops from many member countries. And the reason

NATO must ask for those extra troops in the first place is that all too many of the European troops already deployed in Afghanistan have been carefully positioned out of harm’s way. Even those allies who have sent troops to Afghanistan often insist on rules of engagement that preclude almost all serious missions.

There were many instances of tactlessness in the Bush years. The administration too often lost sight of the value of diplomatic decorum. But every American president, Bush included, always prefers to work with allies, if only for the political cover they can provide. That’s why Bush worked through the six-party talks to tackle North Korea’s nuclear ambitions and through the “Quartet” to address Israel-Palestine. And it is why he has put a smiling face on his assurances that Arab allies have done everything America has asked them to do in the fight against terrorism. If anything, it can be argued that Bush has been overly influenced by allies, at least certain allies. From 2003 to 2006, he outsourced Iran policy to Britain, France, and Germany. Today, the United States’ Iran policy is largely driven by the anxieties and political needs of its Sunni-majority Arab allies in the Middle East. Similarly, Bush’s North Korea policy has retreated from red line to red line, in deference to South Korea.

“Bush Has Pushed Democracy Over All Else”

False. It’s fair to say the president’s rhetoric on democracy has sometimes soared into the empyrean. Actions, however, have not followed words. In Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, the Bush administration has followed a very traditional American policy that attaches relatively little importance to democracy promotion. The same can be said of Iraq, in fact. The war there was fought for a very traditional balance-of-power reason: to overthrow a hostile and dangerous regime believed to be seeking weapons of mass destruction.

Ask the Author

Have a question for David Frum? Send it to letters@ForeignPolicy.com by Sept. 20, and we’ll post his answers on Oct. 1 at ForeignPolicy.com/extras/frum.

The debate over democratization in the Middle East is basically a debate over the causes of extremism. Antidemocratizers see Middle Eastern extremism as a response to grievances arising from the encounter between the Middle East and the West. It is best met, they argue, by some form of conciliation. In practice, this usually means the pursuit of Palestinian statehood. Democratizers, on the other hand, have stressed that extremism originates from dysfunctions within the Middle East itself: tribalism, authoritarianism, and corruption. They argue it can only effectively be addressed by internal reforms. Democratizers have tended to be skeptical of Palestinian statehood. As they see it, extremism is often deliberately stoked by Middle Eastern governments for their own ends, and the creation of a Palestinian state that is anything less than wholeheartedly moderate will most likely exacerbate

rather than mitigate the region's instability and violence. In this debate, the Bush administration has subtly but unmistakably shifted its alignment. Having begun in 2002 by arguing that Palestinian statehood should follow Palestinian reform, it has now reversed itself to pursue Palestinian statehood as a precondition of reform.

Democracy has of course been an important priority for Bush, as it was for most of his predecessors. And like them, the president was often obliged to subordinate that priority to other concerns. In his policy toward

Libya, the president put disarmament ahead of democratization. In China, he has followed past policy by emphasizing stability and trade over political reform. An increasingly authoritarian Russia remains a welcome eighth in the club formerly known as the G-7, despite having an economy that now ranks behind those of China and India, who remain uninvited. Nor has Bush hesitated to levy powerful threats to deter Taiwan from asserting its right to self-government. That is hardly the pursuit of democratization above all else.

“While Bush Was Distracted, China Surged”

Not exactly. If the U.S. economy continues to grow at its recent average of 3 percent a year, even a booming China will not overtake U.S. GDP for half a century. If China's growth rate slows, the moment of “catch up” recedes even further into the future. Such a slowdown seems inevitable. China's financial sector is rickety to the point of collapse, inflation is accelerating, and the country is quickly bumping up against the limits of low-wage manufacturing. Energy and water shortages are rampant. Environmental degradation is escalating into a serious political issue. Political tensions between the central and regional governments are intensifying. And, very soon, China's aging population will have to leave work and begin tapping into its savings. Even if China somehow escapes the laws of economic gravity, what precisely is an American

president to do about it? Try to stunt China's growth? How? And to what end?

Unlike its economic growth, China's strategic assertiveness is a proper American concern. Here the Bush administration acted both decisively and prudently, continuing the long-standing U.S. policy of hoping for the best and preparing for the worst. It cultivated closer strategic ties with Australia, India, Japan, Singapore, and other regional powers, including Vietnam. U.S. warships now once again call at Cam Ranh Bay. If China decides to act out, it will soon find itself hemmed in, thanks in part to these relationships—a reality that is all the more acute thanks to recent elections in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan that have brought pro-American leaders to power. Bush is bequeathing to his successor an Asian strategic environment much friendlier to the United States than the one he inherited.

“America Has Never Been More Hated”

Says who? On what basis could one even begin to decide whether such a statement is accurate? Global opinion surveys are inexact, to put it mildly. A survey of international public opinion by the Pew Research Center, for example, suggests that one fifth of the population of Spain changed its view of the United States in the 12 months between the spring of 2005 and the spring of 2006. Any polling expert knows that strongly held views do not shift that rapidly. A number that bobs up and down reflects, at best, a transitory impression, if not statistical noise. Outside

the developed world, in poor countries that are predominantly rural and illiterate, such global public-opinion surveys tell us even less.

Even if we choose to believe these assessments, what they mostly tell us is that the United States faced serious image problems well before Bush. The Gallup Organization conducted a wide survey of Islamic public opinion between December 2001 and January 2002. It found that a majority of those surveyed regarded the United States unfavorably, with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran being the most hostile. Significant numbers

regarded the 9/11 attacks as justifiable. Barely one fifth of those surveyed accepted that the 9/11 attacks were carried out by Arab men—two thirds denied it outright. In Saudi Arabia, the government refused to allow the question to be asked at all.

Americans like to tell themselves that the world rallied in sympathy to the murder of some 3,000 Americans on Sept. 11, 2001. In fact, the attacks triggered a spasm of delight across the Middle East. The

Middle East Media Research Institute has compiled an archive of grisly press clippings. Many of the worst come from Egypt, a key Middle Eastern ally. In an Islamist opposition newspaper, columnist Salim 'Azzouz wrote, "We have been prohibited from showing the happiness and joy that we feel, so as not to hurt the Americans' feelings—although, in this case, rejoicing is a national and religious obligation." This kind of malignancy has deeper roots than any one president.

"The Next President Will Radically Revise Bush's Policies"

Unlikely. Granted, the next president will feel the need to create an appearance of distance between himself and the unpopular Bush. But that's hardly new. George H.W. Bush did exactly the same thing when he followed the highly popular Ronald Reagan. No doubt, climate change will assume a higher priority under a President McCain or a President Obama. Guantánamo Bay will, in all likelihood, be closed. The United States will take a more active role in international organizations. And the next president will probably try harder to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

Yet the continuity between Bush and his successor will be strong. A U.S. drawdown from Iraq will proceed more slowly than most expect. Relationships with

India, Japan, and Vietnam will continue to grow. The United States will continue to spend much more on military power than all other major countries combined. Financial pressures on Iran will continue to intensify. The United States will still press for more open trade. And even democracy promotion, Bush's most maligned foreign-policy goal, will continue to figure prominently in presidential addresses for years to come.

George W. Bush's political opponents will surely revile him long after he's gone. But you can be sure of this: Just as the Bush presidency led Democrats to express an unexpected nostalgia for Ronald Reagan, the next Republican president can expect to hear from pundits and academics alike that he falls far short of the high standard set by the last one. **FP**

Want to Know More?

David Frum's *Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) offers a strategy for contemporary conservatives to repair their relationship with Americans. In "Who Wins in Iraq? Samuel Huntington" (*FOREIGN POLICY*, March/April 2007), Frum argues that Iraq catalyzed a clash of civilizations.

For a look at two of the major architects of Bush's foreign policy, see *The Confidante: Condoleezza Rice and the Creation of the Bush Legacy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), by Glenn Kessler, and "Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency" (*Washington Post*, June 24–27, 2007), by Barton Gellman and Jo Becker.

The PBS documentary "Bush's War" (*Frontline*, March 24–25, 2008) examines the lasting impact of the Iraq war on Bush's legacy. In "The War We Deserve" (*FOREIGN POLICY*, November/December 2007), Alasdair Roberts argues that the American people are complicit in the failures of Bush's foreign policy.

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