

Bye Bye Bush

What History Will Make of 43

By Adam Garfinkle

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Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power. Fred Kaplan. Wiley, 2008, 256 \$25.95

Summary: Three flawed books on George W. Bush's presidency are useful, but only for background. They focus on the administration's various errors even though sins of omission are more likely to define the Bush legacy.

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Also in this review:

. Jacob Heilbrunn. Doubleday, 2008, 319 pp. \$26.00.

. Jacob Weisberg. Random House, 2008, 271 pp. \$26.00.

If newspaper reports constitute the first draft of history, then books by magazine journalists may constitute the second. That second-drafting process never abates these days, and it accelerates as an election looms, particularly at the end of an administration widely thought to be scandalous or incompetent. It is therefore no surprise that critical postmortems of George W. Bush's administration are already pouring forth. Recent books by Fred Kaplan, Jacob Heilbrunn, and Jacob Weisberg are cases in point: all three were written by political journalists and published by commercial houses that know well their customers' political profiles, and all are critical of Bush and what his two administrations have wrought.

These books will not satisfy true Bush haters, however. None, for example, claims that administration principals lied deliberately about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in prewar Iraq or about anything else of significance. But none will satisfy scholars either, for they do not follow the strict rules of social science sourcing, and they have structural flaws. Kaplan and Heilbrunn both propose plausible and interesting theses but do not develop them sufficiently. Weisberg carries his through, but it is hopelessly speculative. Still, despite these shortcomings, later drafters of the Bush legacy will find all three books useful -- Kaplan's and Heilbrunn's mainly as historical background to the Bush presidency, Weisberg's as an insightful and nuanced account of what has happened since January 2001.

BURNING BUSH

Kaplan argues that the cardinal error of the Bush administration was a compound misreading of the end of the Cold War and of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Contrary to the reigning assumptions of the American political class, Kaplan claims, the end of the Cold War did not enhance America's relative power but reduced it, and contrary to the administration's assumptions, 9/11 did not "change everything." The administration's overwrought reaction to 9/11, combined with its "inclination to devise policies based on the premise of omnipotence, made America weaker still."

Kaplan's thesis bears the unmistakably musky scent of realism. This will appeal to some readers more than others but, in any event, is hardly novel. Observations that the passing of the bipolarity of the Cold War sharply reduced Washington's influence over its allies and encouraged other powers to balance against the American hegemon are commonplace. But they are correct and deserve to be developed and illustrated. Instead, Kaplan

detours into other subjects long dear to him. He spends more than a hundred pages discussing the origins of the "revolution in military affairs," the background to Washington's North Korea policy, and the multidecade saga of ballistic missile defense before addressing Bush's first term. These discussions are often illuminating, but they are disproportionately detailed for what they contribute to Kaplan's main argument.

Once Kaplan places the Bush administration at center stage, he relies on a biographical approach, set in a political context and presented chronologically. But he focuses as much on Michael Gerson, Bush's chief speechwriter, and Natan Sharansky, the Russian dissident turned Israeli politician, as on President Bush and his principal aides. Gerson, Sharansky, and others are important to Kaplan's argument because his purpose is to illustrate the familiar point that after the shock of 9/11, only the neoconservatives had in hand an explanatory template that fit the president's temperament. His discussion is too clipped, however, to adequately describe the evolution of the administration's thinking and behavior, especially the protean policy known as the Bush doctrine. The same is true of the fewer than 40 pages devoted to the Iraq war and the rest of the administration's Middle East policy.

Kaplan's conclusion focuses on the flaws of the president's so-called freedom agenda: "There is no Universal Man marching inexorably down a common path to freedom. Real human history is molded, not fated. . . . It is not only naïve but reckless to believe that blowing off a tyrant's lid will unleash the geyser of liberty. It will unleash only whatever social forces have been teeming or festering underneath." This is true, and Kaplan is correct to insist that details will not take care of themselves even if one gets the big ideas right. Those in charge of the president's policies, Kaplan notes, "cared little about the details of warfare, knew little about the realities of the Middle East, and had not thought through what made freedom work in their own country, much less what might make it work elsewhere." As a result, Kaplan concludes, in the administration's "attempt to pass off America's ideals and interests as one and the same, President Bush and his advisers damaged both."

Yet only at the very end of the book does Kaplan grapple with the implications of his own thesis. Neoconservatism overreaches, isolationism is unavailable, and amoral realpolitik is unworkable as an American policy. So how can the United States best understand and act in the world of the twenty-first century? How does the internal character of foreign regimes matter? How can the tensions between sovereign rights and the logic of preemption be resolved? These are good questions, but they and others remain virtually unexplored, and *Daydream Believers* ends leaving its most attractive features all too poorly adorned.

A CERTAIN IDEA

Heilbrunn's way into the vicissitudes of the Bush administration is to track the historical trajectory of neoconservatism. He claims that none of the many books on the movement so far has gotten its essence right. Neoconservatism is not an ideology, he argues, and it is not a reaction to disillusionment with the left; it is a "Jewish mindset" that was "decisively shaped by the Jewish immigrant experience, by the Holocaust, and by the twentieth-century struggle against totalitarianism."

Heilbrunn augments his definition of the neoconservative "mindset" as his narrative develops: "the immigrant experience" turns out to be the Jews' status anxiety and resentment of the WASP patriciate, and the "struggle against totalitarianism" comes down to a visceral disgust with irresolute liberalism. Heilbrunn also refers in passing to secularized expressions of the Jewish prophetic tradition, in which zealous dissident minorities defiantly speak truth to power. He thus observes that neoconservatives have thrived under conditions of minority and outsider status, and that once near the pinnacle of power they have sought to maintain that self-image by casting unimaginative government bureaucrats and intelligence-agency ciphers as the neoconservative equivalent of the Man.

Yet Heilbrunn leaves this observation at the periphery of his thesis when it should be central to it. Whatever else neoconservatism may be, it is a parochial Jewish expression of the modern penchant for religious energies to attach to politics. Neoconservatives, who tend to be far more deeply read in politics and history than religion

and are generally less than orthodox in their religious practice, have substituted democratic ideology for Jewish theology as the central core of their belief system. The intra-Marxist debates that Heilbrunn describes as having taken place among the children of Jewish immigrants in the 1930s, and the way Leo Strauss read ancient philosophical tomes to tease out their meaning, are nothing less than the application of the intensely moral, text-oriented methodology of Talmudism to different texts. Second-generation neoconservative idealists have in turn substituted the heroic and optimistic narratives of American and Israeli history for the far dourer, realism-inducing narrative of Jewish history. They believe that embattled minorities armed with the truth can transform history. Like the prophets of old, they are a chosen few with a message about the messianic age ahead -- in this case, the age of global liberal democracy and lasting peace.

Of course, as Heilbrunn knows, not all neoconservatives have been Jewish. It is not difficult to appreciate why other American idealists would sympathize with the neoconservative project as it came of political age. In the mid- to late 1960s, the neoconservative movement developed as a critical and idealist rump within the Democratic Party. Its members, mostly New York intellectuals, were disappointed by the party's failed domestic social-engineering projects and repulsed by its lurch toward countercultural values and dovish national security policies. It is understandable that Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a man from a poor New York Irish Catholic family who also suffered status insecurity, would associate himself with such a movement, and that Jeane Kirkpatrick, a small-town Middle American woman in a man's world, would, too.

Most neoconservatives then moved to fill an idealistic void on the right in the 1970s and 1980s, as the Republican Party was reacquiring power and Ronald Reagan arrived on the scene. The last decade of the Cold War saw a virtual merger between neoconservatism and Reaganism, which neoconservatives continued to nurture after Reagan left office. Nor is it hard to see why, in the wake of 9/11, at a time that seemed to require hope in something more elevated than sheer power, conservative realists such as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and John Bolton would make common cause with neoconservative idealists.

Heilbrunn gets much of this story right, but his "Jewish mindset" thesis falls by the wayside as he proceeds. Moreover, like Kaplan, he takes a long detour from the events of the past seven years, recapitulating the history of neoconservatism from its origins in the 1930s to the present. His book describes everyone who was anyone in the movement, as well as their arguments, antipathies, and friendships. It is eminently fair to its subject and often deeply insightful -- as when it points out the transformation of neoconservatism as it evolved from a movement made up of New York intellectuals to one of Washington policymakers and wonks.

But Heilbrunn does not get everything right. He underestimates the power of domesticity, and of the concomitant exhaustions of parenthood, to turn youthful Marxist firebrands into more seasoned conservative intellectuals. More important, he underestimates the seminal importance of domestic policy issues to neoconservatives, as symbolized by the 1965 creation of *The Public Interest* as the movement's flagship magazine. By privileging foreign policy, Heilbrunn undervalues the strength of the original neoconservative antipathy for value-free social analysis and the proclivity for social engineering that comes from it. That, in turn, may be why Heilbrunn is reluctant to accept the conclusion of many of the movement's founders that neoconservatism is unrecognizable in its current form. Heilbrunn concedes that the second generation of neoconservatives lacks "the deep sense of historical irony that had distinguished Irving Kristol" and does not display its predecessor's "skepticism and sense of detachment." So why then does he chide Francis Fukuyama and others for having defected from the neoconservative brand rather than chastising the latecomers for cheapening it?

TRAGIC FLAWS

Only about the final tenth of *They Knew They Were Right* concerns the intersection of neoconservatism and the Bush administration, and so, like Kaplan's book, it contributes to an understanding of the Bush legacy primarily by providing background. Weisberg's *The Bush Tragedy* is, for the most part, more on point. It succeeds despite a fanciful thesis, which Weisberg develops with the help of two virtual co-authors. The first is Shakespeare,

whose Henriad serves as a running analogy for his depiction of a modern tragedy (with George H. W. as Henry IV and George W. as the problem son Hal). The second co-author is Freud. Weisberg invokes the two to ply a part-oedipal, part-sociological explanation of "intergenerational rootedness," namely, "the curious persistence of family patterns over long spans of time." Weisberg summarizes Act 1 of the Bush tragedy as "the son's struggle to be like his dad until the age of forty," Act 2 as "his growing success over the next fifteen years as he learned to be different," and Act 3 as his "botched search for a doctrine to clarify world affairs and the president's progressive descent into messianism."

Weisberg's opening chapters detail the president's paternal forebears: the Bushes, old-stock Protestant New Englanders, taciturn, deliberate, modest, and devoted to public service, and the Walkers, down-on-their-luck slave-owning Catholics from Maryland who made a fortune in the Midwest, bullying and temperamental nouveaux riches prone to selfishness and snap judgments. George H. W., asserts Weisberg, is his father Prescott's son, but George W. is a Walker.

Weisberg paints the family dynamics at length, showing, for example, how the young George W.'s affection for his great-grandfather Bert Walker prefigured his adult personality. George W. loved and revered his father but failed repeatedly to attain his level of achievement in academics, sports, or character. This drove George W. to a life of dissipation and led his parents to favor his younger brother Jeb as the heir to the family's political destiny. That, in turn, drove a resentful George W. to remake himself into a success on his own terms. Through sheer willpower and the aid of a new faith, George W. stopped trying to be like George H. W. and became a Walker-like opposite. That same determination, Weisberg argues, ultimately led George W. to assemble a surrogate family, with Karl Rove as the little brother who would follow orders, Condoleezza Rice as the reborn sister (Robin, one of George W.'s real sisters, died when he was seven), Cheney as a new father figure, and Winston Churchill and Reagan as stand-in ancestors.

There are problems with this approach. On the one hand, Weisberg depicts George W. Bush's Walker traits as essentially determinate; on the other, he testifies to Bush's power to change and become his own man. Weisberg's reasoning is also essentially circular: Bush is a Walker and so acts reflexively as a falsely self-confident "Decider"; Bush rushed to invade Iraq without proper deliberation or planning, and so he must be a Walker.

Even if such a Shakespearean-Freudian thesis could be proved, Weisberg, who has no doctoral degree or clinical experience in psychology, is not the man for the job. Nor does he approach the subject with scientific dispassion. In the book's introduction, Weisberg calls Bush "incurious and intellectually lazy," a "fundamentally limited person" who lacks "any capacity for self-knowledge" and appeals to historical figures to sustain "his delusions." Weisberg, the creator of the Bushisms series, nonetheless claims to have "no personal dislike for George W. Bush" and says that his book is not "intended as an indictment" but is "an attempt at explanation." Yet in the single nastiest sentence in any of the three books, he also announces: "I'm going to skip ahead to the next stage by assuming he has failed as president -- something that few people without a financial stake in defending him still dispute with much conviction."

Americans love to read portraits of their republican royalty -- the more scandalous and prurient, apparently the better. And one senses from everyday experience that the intergenerational dynamics of powerful families do matter and that Shakespeare's insights transcend mere entertainment. Some readers will think Weisberg's approach wonderful; others will think him a fabulist. In any event, the thesis cannot explain what it purports to explain. Presidential decisions and management styles are not determined by father-son dynamics; the larger contexts of domestic and international politics in which they are played out matter enormously.

And yet, despite its logical frailties, *The Bush Tragedy* mostly succeeds as explanation. The chapter entitled "The Gospel of George," for example, is the most compelling description of Bush's religious faith -- a "self-help Methodism" with "no theological content" -- available. Weisberg describes Bush's religious epiphany as "premeditated" -- a perfect word choice, by which he means that it was designed for political use and yet was not

necessarily disingenuous. Bush's religion is part and parcel of his willpower, and so it is instrumental rather than transcendent in character.

Weisberg's analysis of Bush's relationships with his most trusted advisers, such as Cheney and Rove, weaves biography and chronology with consummate skill. No one has better captured what Cheney and Rove are about and what they have brought about. Cheney, Weisberg understands, is a man of firm conservative principles whose devotion to what he believes is the proper constitutional reading of executive power has not changed in 40 years. Cheney may be wrong -- Weisberg thinks so -- but he is neither insincere nor opportunistic.

Weisberg's treatment of Rove clearly shows the almost total interpenetration of politics and policy in this administration. Bush's decision to follow Rove's advice to govern from his base rather than the center and use a presidential management style that "emphasizes leadership and decision-making to the exclusion of administration and management" goes far to explain the administration's pervasive inability, in domestic and foreign policy alike, to assemble governing coalitions and implement policy decisions.

Weisberg also provides a nugget of analysis that could be historically significant in his intriguing discussion of the October 2001 anthrax attacks. Modest as those attacks turned out to be, at the time most administration principals feared they were the harbingers of imminent follow-on attacks to 9/11, possibly involving biological weapons. Cheney was so worried about the prospect that he secretly traveled to the Centers for Disease Control, in Atlanta, to discuss the problem with government experts and subsequently proposed vaccinating the entire country against smallpox in spite of the considerable risks involved. Weisberg argues that if not for the anthrax episode -- and what turned out to be misread intelligence about Iraq's bioweapons programs -- the administration probably would not have invaded Iraq. Weisberg supports his argument by citing interviews with former policymakers that link the timing of the decision to go to war with the White House's interpretation of the anthrax episode. Having done so, he did not need to deploy his Freudian argument and claim George W. was determined to finish in Iraq what George H. W. had started but failed to see through. Unfortunately, he does, thus overdetermining the origins of a war that was hardly inevitable.

RIGOR VITAE

Years from now, when historians work on advanced drafts of the Bush legacy, they may well conclude that the Iraq war, the failed "freedom agenda," and the White House's response to 9/11 compose its central contributions. But this is not certain. After all, judgments about historical epochs are, as the humorist S. J. Perelman once observed of the prospects for immortality, "subject to the caprice of the unborn." And even if these policies do turn out to be the main themes of the Bush presidency, they might look different a decade or so hence. For example, the conclusion of all three authors that the Iraq war and the collapsed freedom agenda make the Bush presidency a failure is premature. All three books were conceived before the surge in U.S. troop levels in Iraq improved security there. More broadly, who can possibly know now the long-term effects of current U.S. policy in the Middle East, any more than French observers in 1801 could accurately reckon the impact of Napoleon's botched adventures in Egypt? Yes, neoconservatives, flush with having been vindicated by the West's victory in the Cold War, lazily applied their creed to problems and places for which their experience was a poor guide. But who is to say that a third generation of neoconservatives, whose arrival Heilbrunn foresees, will not do better? Whatever they are called, and wherever they come from, there will be idealists in the United States' future.

Other subjects, moreover, may displace those that dominate today. One cost of waging a war of choice is the time and attention it necessarily diverts from other issues. The rise of Asia and the unprecedented transfer of wealth from the West to the East over the past several years -- as well as the Bush administration's inability to take the full measure of either development -- are likely to pose dilemmas for future presidents. Even more consequential, perhaps, may be the administration's failure to competently address issues of institutional design. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the restructuring of the intelligence community are monuments to retrograde management thinking. These reforms have overcentralized and

overlayed the bureaucracy, saddling U.S. national security with new liabilities; the country is arguably less safe because of them. Meanwhile, the existing national security bureaucracy, whose basic structure was created in 1947 and has been tinkered with incrementally ever since, is getting frail with age. Even the right people in the right places are running out of ways to devise work-arounds to get things done. Like most of its predecessors since the Eisenhower administration, the Bush administration has paid no sustained attention to structural governance issues. And in several instances -- as when it added new programs, such as the admirably conceived Millennium Challenge Account and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, to the existing development-aid architecture without considering the overall result -- it has made things worse.

The stark contrast between the vitality of the United States' culture and economy and the ossification of its federal government -- sadly illustrated by the response to Hurricane Katrina and the contracting fiascos in Iraq -- is the central issue of the day. Various sins of omission over the past seven years have exacerbated this problem, and it is these, rather than the more visible sins of commission discussed by Kaplan, Heilbrunn, and Weisberg, that are all too likely to define the Bush legacy.

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