

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

ScholarWorks@UARK

---

Education Reform Faculty and Graduate  
Students Publications

Education Reform

---

9-3-2009

## Bush's Brain (No, Not Karl Rove): How Bush's Psyche Shaped His Decision Making

Robert Maranto

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, rmaranto@uark.edu

Richard E. Redding

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/edrepub>



Part of the American Politics Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Leadership Commons, Political History Commons, Political Theory Commons, and the United States History Commons

---

### Citation

Maranto, R., & Redding, R. E. (2009). Bush's Brain (No, Not Karl Rove): How Bush's Psyche Shaped His Decision Making. *Education Reform Faculty and Graduate Students Publications*. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/edrepub/113>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education Reform at ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Reform Faculty and Graduate Students Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact [ccmiddle@uark.edu](mailto:ccmiddle@uark.edu).

# CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW



## LEGAL STUDIES RESEARCH PAPER SERIES

PAPER NO. 09-42

***Bush's Brain (No, Not Karl Rove): How Bush's Psyche Shaped His  
Decision Making***

Richard E. Redding

This paper can be downloaded without charge at:

The Social Science Research Network Electronic Paper Collection:

<http://ssrn.com/abstract=1462386>

This will be published in September 2009 as chapter 2 of Maranto, R, T. Lansford, and J. Johnson eds. Judging Bush. Stanford: Stanford University Press (September 2009).<sup>1</sup>

**Presented September 3, 2009 at the APSA in Toronto**

**Bush's Brain (No, Not Karl Rove):  
How Bush's Psyche Shaped His Decision-making<sup>1</sup>**  
Robert Maranto and Richard E. Redding

**CONTACT: Robert Anthony Maranto**

21st Century Chair in Leadership  
Department of Education Reform  
University of Arkansas  
201 Graduate Education Building  
College of Education and Health Professions  
Fayetteville, AR 72701  
479-575-3225 (Fax: 3196) or 610-299-3683 (cell); [rmaranto@uark.edu](mailto:rmaranto@uark.edu)  
<http://www.uaedreform.org/People/maranto.php>

**ABSTRACT:** We will summarize the most systematic work on George W. Bush's psyche, stressing that leader personality traits should not be judged as good nor bad: Rather traits which match some situations mismatch others. SAT scores and other available measures indicate that Bush has sufficient intelligence to serve as president. Yet the best studies, in which raters evaluate statements without being aware of their source, suggest that Bush lacks integrative complexity and thus views issues without nuance (Thoemmes and Conway 2007). The leading personality theory (the "5-Factor Model"), as measured by the NEO Personality Inventory, suggests that Bush is highly extraverted but not very agreeable or conscientious. He also rates low on "Openness to Experience" (Rubenzer and Faschingbauer 2004). Similarly Immelman (2002) had expert raters judge Bush's personality using the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria. Raters identified Bush as fitting the "Outgoing," "Dominant (Controlling)," and "Dauntless" personality patterns, which together constitute a style given to lack of reflection, superficiality, and impulsivity. When compared to other presidents, Bush most closely resembles Jackson, Reagan, and Harding, but is very unlike his father, George H.W. Bush.

We apply these findings to discussions of the President Bush's decision-making in the cases of his most notable success, education reform, and his most notable failure, the Iraq war. We argue that Bush's psychological predispositions were particularly noteworthy in the latter, in part since greater presidential power in foreign policy magnifies the impacts of leader personality.

Comic routines to the contrary, there is nothing dumb about George W. Bush. At the

---

<sup>1</sup> We wish to thank April W. Gresham, Dirk van Raemdonck, Andrew Dowdle, two anonymous reviewers, and the

same time, as other works in this volume suggest, President Bush has psychological characteristics which limited his competence as a "decider" (to use his term), and ultimately undermined the administration. Arguably, President Bush had strategic competence: a vision of where he wanted to push government compatible with national needs. He thus could have become a president of achievement (Nelson 1993). However, the President seemingly lacked the tactical competence to hew to and implement his vision. President Bush had bad luck in the Hurricane Katrina, and White House insiders believed that the Democratic opposition would attack no matter what the President did (Feaver 2008). Indeed increased partisanship is a feature of modern American politics (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Yet Bush's personal psychology also played a key role in his presidential failures. We believe that George W. Bush's tendency to personalize policy-making, his unwillingness to seriously entertain opposing views, his disdain for detail, his enthusiasm for new challenges, and his reluctance to admit error and change course, led to both successes and failures. Ultimately, the very substantial failures in Iraq doomed George W. Bush's second term agenda, and cloud his legacy. We will summarize the better work on George W. Bush's psyche, stressing that leader personality traits should not be judged good or bad: Rather personality traits which match some situations mismatch others. We will apply this with a brief discussion of the President Bush's most notable success, education reform. Here, his prior experience and knowledge, ebullient salesmanship, and holding firm to ideas whose time had come led to success. We will follow with a more substantial discussion of President Bush's singular failure, Iraq.

As discussed in chapter 1, presidents have more power in foreign policy, magnifying the impacts of personality on policy. Further, as shown by Jervis (1976; 2008), national security

---

Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas for their assistance; the usual caveats apply.

policy involves highly uncertain information, calling for leaders to seek and integrate new information. Finally, all leaders learn from history, and the particular histories of education policy and relations with Iraq, influenced the president and other policy-makers in ways few have discussed. Past history and flawed intelligence---not leader personality---led to the American invasion of Iraq. Yet if the decision to invade may have been rational, the implementation of invasion was not. This failure reflected key aspects of President Bush's personality.

### ***Inside Bush's Brain***

Biographies and “psychohistories” of George W. Bush began to appear shortly after he became Governor of Texas in 1994. This literature uses biographical, psychoanalytic, or empirical perspectives to analyze Bush’s cognitive abilities and functioning, personality, or emotional makeup. Bush has not submitted himself for a psychological examination, so all three approaches must rely on the same available source materials (e.g., interviews, statements, news accounts, biographies) and/or the opinions of experts. The familiar biographical approach compiles a history of Bush’s life providing psychological insights (e.g., Renshon 2004; Weisberg 2008), but proffers neither a clinical nor empirical analysis of his psychological functioning.<sup>2</sup> The psychoanalytic approach (e.g., Frank 2004) uses the analyst’s clinical opinion derived from psychoanalytically-oriented principles which are now considered largely outmoded. The scientific approach provides psychological profiles derived from empirical analyses of source materials and/or by soliciting experts to rate Bush on standardized, scientifically validated psychological measures. All three methods have their weaknesses, but in combination they have some descriptive power. For the most part we will use the empirical findings from the scientific approach, occasionally supplemented by the other two, to assess Bush's tactical competence. We do not provide a comprehensive portrayal of Bush’s psyche, a project far beyond our scope, but

rather discuss those aspects most relevant to decision making and leadership. We will discuss Bush's intelligence, decision-making style, and basic personality.

### *Is Bush Intelligent?*

We can estimate Bush's intelligence quotient (IQ) in several ways. First, we use his college Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score, since SAT scores correlate well with IQ measures (Frey and Detterman 2004). Bush scored a 1200 on the SAT (roughly equaling 1300 on today's re-normed SAT), placing him in the top 16% of all college applicants (Immelman 2001). Second, we can look to Simonton's (2006) recent study of presidential IQ. Simonton compiled personality descriptions of the presidents based on biographical sources, removed identifying information from the descriptions, and asked independent judges to rate each along 300 descriptors using the Gough Adjective Checklist. The data were then statistically analyzed to identify key factors relating to psychological functioning, identifying one factor called "intellectual brilliance" (which included adjectives such as "curious," "wise," "insightful," "inventive," "wide interests," etc.). The intellectual brilliance scores were cross-validated with other indices of presidential intelligence, such as recorded IQ test scores available for some of the presidents and other research studies that have assessed the personality trait "Openness to Experience," which is correlated with intelligence. Using these varied data and measures, Simonton used a statistical procedure to estimate the IQ of each president. The best estimate placed Bush's IQ at 120-125, *in the top 10% of the population and above the 115 average IQ for college graduates.*

Thus President Bush has a superior IQ, about the same as the estimated IQ for Eisenhower and Ford. Yet he is less intelligent than most presidents, many of whom were brilliant. Among the 42 other presidents, four are tied with Bush and only six rank lower in

intellectual brilliance or IQ.

Given the considerable political and intellectual skills required to successfully run for the presidency along with the demands of the office itself---in which presidents must think quickly and routinely make decisions based on complex information---it is not surprising that most of our presidents have been highly intelligent. Studies find IQ to be a strong – often the single best – predictor of job performance and leadership across a variety of occupations. Intelligence does correlate with measures of presidential leadership and greatness, as judged by historians and political scientists (Simonton 2006).<sup>3</sup> Intelligence also is moderately correlated with measures of presidential charisma, creativity, and motivation to achieve (Simonton 2002). Based on his IQ alone, we should expect that Bush will be judged by history as ranking about 26<sup>th</sup> out of our 42 presidents in presidential greatness (Simonton 2006, 523).

### ***What Kind of Thinker is Bush?***

Critics charge that President Bush does not seek out information or opposing viewpoints; disdains complexity, nuances, and expert opinion; views policy issues in black-and-white terms based on his own preconceptions; and, refuses to rethink problems or change his views. The research largely bears out these popular perceptions. One line of research addresses “integrative complexity” (IC), the complexity of a leader’s thinking. It is best characterized as a style of thinking rather than an intellectual ability, though it does correlate with intelligence (Thoemmes and Conway 2007). Those having low IC “can be described as engaging in ‘black-or-white’ thinking, all-or-nothing judgments, possessing a general inability or unwillingness to accept uncertainty and divergent viewpoints, and a desire for rapid closure” (Thoemmes and Conway 2007: 195). They “can only see things from one perspective – their own – and so no integration is necessary” (Simonton 2006, 522). Researchers assess IC by randomly compiling excerpts

from a leader's interviews and speeches, removing identifying information from those excerpts, and then having trained coders rate each statement in the excerpts for integrative complexity, as assessed by a standardized coding scheme for measuring IC (see Baker-Brown et al. 1992).<sup>4</sup>

Thoemmes and Conway (2007) employed this methodology to assess the integrative complexity of all the presidents. Bush's integrative complexity score was about average, virtually identical to Reagan's and only a bit lower than Clinton's. However, "complex presidents were...not significantly more likely to be considered 'great' presidents in the eyes of history . . . what makes a successful leader is not so much the mean level of complexity but rather the *match* between complexity level and situation" (Thoemmes and Conway 2007, 215).

Thus a better key to successful leadership lies in thinking complexly at the right *times*, in the right *situations*, and with respect to the right *issues*. For example, President Reagan held a relatively simplistic view of the Soviet "evil empire," but showed the cognitive flexibility to change his views shortly after Gorbachev came to power, perhaps in part due to Reagan's own policies (Winik 1996).

In contrast to his hero, Ronald Reagan, Bush failed with respect to the signature foreign policy decision of his presidency – the decision to invade Iraq (Weisberg 2008), a theme of several other chapters in this volume. Suedfeld and Leighton (2002) analyzed the statements and speeches made by Bush between 1999 to mid-October 2002 (the time of the attack on Afghanistan following 9/11), finding that his IC remained relatively low and stable throughout this time period, lower than that of every elected twentieth-century president from McKinley to Carter (see Tetlock 1981). Bush's IC score "is indicative of someone who discusses issues without taking alternative points of view into serious consideration . . . . Bush's score does not change with the political conditions, unlike what usually holds for successful political and

military leaders” (Simonton 2006, 522). Simplistic thinking about policy goals, while beneficial in some situations, may “lead to the ignoring of crucial information or potentially successful decisions, to a misunderstanding of what one’s people, allies and opponents are doing or thinking, and to rigid adherence to a failing plan” (Suedfeld and Leighton 2002, 587). Though none have studied the matter, we suspect that President Bush's IC on education issues, on which he had more preexisting knowledge, would be higher. Notably, Weisberg (2008) argues that Bush, Woodrow Wilson, and Jimmy Carter all suffered from low IC, and all failed on their signature initiatives. Berggren and Rae (2006) argue that for Bush and Carter, in particular, evangelical *faith* led to foreign policy ineffectiveness.

A third factor related both to integrative complexity and intelligence is the leader’s openness to new ideas and experiences (see Simonton 2006), a trait psychologists call “Openness to Experience” as measured by the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO). In Rubenzer and Faschingbauer’s (2004) study, three expert raters read the available biographies of Bush and rated him on the NEO scales. Bush scored a zero out of a possible 100 for openness, the lowest of any president (see Simonton 2006, 516). This “suggests that his well-documented lack of doubt may be due to lack of introspection or inability to perceive things from a different perspective” (Rubenzer and Faschingbauer 2004, 303).

Finally, although there are no empirical studies on the issue, Bush’s inattention to detail, superficial approach, and relatively poor academic performance relative to his intellect might be explained by Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Elovitz 2004, Frank 2004). These learning disabilities are characterized by a difficulty in focusing attention and attending to detail, and often by impulsivity.

### ***What is Bush’s Personality?***

The leading personality theory (the “5-Factor Model”) conceptualizes personality as consisting of five primary facets, as assessed by the NEO (“Neuroticism-Extraversion-Openness”) Personality Inventory: “Neuroticism” (anxiety, hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, vulnerability to stress), “Extraversion” (warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity level, excitement seeking, positive emotion), “Openness to Experience” (openness to fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas, and values), “Agreeableness” (trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, tender-mindedness), and “Conscientiousness” (competence, orderliness, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-discipline, deliberativeness). According to Rubenzer and Faschingbauer’s (2004) study (described above), *Bush is highly extraverted but not very agreeable or conscientious; he is about average in neuroticism.* When compared to other presidents, his personality most closely resembles that of Jackson, Reagan, and Harding, though he is very unlike his father, President George H.W. Bush. Indeed this dissimilarity to his father is a key theme in *The Bush Tragedy* (Weisberb 2008).

Immelman (2002) had expert raters judge Bush’s personality using the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria, a widely used personality test. Raters identified Bush as fitting the “Outgoing,” “Dominant (Controlling),” and “Dauntless” personality patterns, which together constitute a style given to unreflectiveness, superficiality, and impulsivity. Such individuals are “full of ideas, though tending to be a superficial thinker; likely to start many projects but inconsistent in following through, compensating with a natural salesperson’s ability to persuade others to join in getting things done” (see Immelman 2002, 98). They have “the propensity for a superficial grasp of complex issues, a predisposition to be easily bored by routine (with the attendant risk of failing to keep himself adequately informed), [and] an inclination to act

impulsively without fully appreciating the implications of his decisions or the long-term consequences of his policy initiatives” (Immelman 2002, 102). Immelman's findings are validated by Weisberg (2008, 183-220), who describes the *six* distinct Bush foreign policy doctrines in the course of the administration.

### ***Comparing Empirical Findings with Biographies***

The empirical research findings confirm much of what we are told in available biographies, psychohistories, political commentaries, and insider accounts of the Bush presidency. In *The Price of Loyalty*, former Bush Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill (2004) paints a portrait of Bush as a casual and unreflective decision maker who does not like to have his opinions challenged by advisors and who values personal loyalty above all else. Bush's disdain for complexity is typified by his alleged remark that he “never suffered doubt” about whether to invade Iraq (Woodward 2004, 420). *Bush on the Couch*, Justin Frank’s wide ranging psychoanalytic treatment, also describes Bush’s tendency towards simplistic, moralistic thinking.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Elovitz’s (2004) psychohistorical analysis describes how gregarious and interpersonally skilled Bush was as a youth – often wild and mischievous, though a leader and always part of the “cool crowd,” disdainful of the intellectuals at the preparatory and Ivy-league schools he attended. In “*George W. Bush: Policy, Politics and Personality*,” James Pfiffner (2003, 161) describes Bush as having “shown a preference for moral certainty over strategic calculation; a tendency for visceral reaction rather than reflection; a preference for clarity rather than complexity; a bias toward action rather than deliberation; and a preference for the personal over the structural or procedural.” The latter explains Bush's remarkable loyalty toward subordinates who are themselves loyal, including cabinet members Alberto Gonzales, Donald Rumsfeld, and Michael Chertoff, who should have been held accountable long before they were

actually separated from the administration (or in Chertoff's case, not separated), as well as Bush's failed Supreme Court nomination Harriet Miers, an impulsive, ill-considered decision based on personal friendship (Weisberg 2008, 15, 19, 170).

### ***Bush's Psyche: Implications for Presidential Leadership***

In summary, *Bush is an extraverted, domineering, and somewhat adventurous and impulsive individual, lacking in conscientiousness, who is intelligent but relatively superficial and unreflective.* People with Bush's personality pattern are gregarious and warm, skilled at persuading and rallying others; they seek attention and approval from others; they are assertive, positive and enthusiastic; they are confident when wielding power or directing others, but not very accommodating of others' wishes; they tend to act impulsively and are relatively unreflective; they tend to be shallow, lacking in introspection and unwilling to grapple with emotional conflicts; and, they may engage in risk-taking or sensation-seeking behavior (Rubenzer and Faschingbauer 2004).

Bush's psyche had both positive and negative potential consequences for his presidential leadership (see Immelman 2002, Rubenzer and Faschingbauer 2004). On the positive side, such leaders tend to be politically skilled, charismatic, energetic, and effective at rallying and shaping public opinion, and effective managers and delegators of authority. On the negative side, they may be prone to poor and unreflective decision making, refuse to consider alternative or unpleasant points of view, over-rely on friendship and loyalty when making appointments, and be overly confident or cocky. Bush's tendency towards simplistic, superficial, preconceived thinking, reinforced by his particular religious views, leads him to view problems in all-or-none, moralistic terms. Frank (2004) and Elovitz (2004) argue that Bush is prone to psychological

“splitting” – the emotional need to categorize people as either all good or all bad, and thus to personalize conflicts accordingly.

Yet Bush is smarter than those who have “misunderestimated” him have supposed, and his extraverted personality supports his considerable political skills. He was elected governor of Texas and president of the United States – two accomplishments requiring considerable intelligence, discipline, and political skill. He is smart enough to serve as president, though not as smart as most presidents. Yet in governing, he has a cognitive and personality style prone to ill-informed, rigid, and unreflective decision making. Thus, Bush’s psyche provides an outstanding skill set for *campaigning* and rallying public opinion for agreed-upon goals, but a poor one for *governing*, at least to the extent that governing requires well-considered decision making.

### ***Bush's Psych in Action: Success on No Child Left Behind***

The greatest domestic achievement of the Bush administration was the *No Child Left Behind* law (NCLB), as detailed by Frederick Hess and Patrick McGuinn elsewhere in this volume. Applying the Skowronek scheme described in chapter 1, in this area President Bush used the presidency as a battering ram to demolish an obsolete policy regime, a dauntless presidential action suiting his bold leadership style. This revolutionary law forces states to develop school standards and to test students to measure (and foster) academic growth. Schools and school districts must make progress toward an eventual goal of 100% proficiency for all groups of students, including minority, low income, and special needs students. Those failing to do so are labeled "needing improvement," and eventually may face sanctions.

Bush's interest in education reflected his own painful experiences as a poor transfer

student in prep school after doing well in his West Texas public school (Bush 1999), his genuine "compassionate conservative" goal to improve education in order to foster class mobility (a theme of the Afterword in this volume), and his political need to win votes from contested constituencies, particularly minorities and women. Texas Governor Bush immersed himself in education policy, crafting accountability programs building on those of his Democratic predecessor. Indeed Bush was more in synch ideologically with Texas Democratic legislators than with its more conservative Republicans. Bush's education record earned plaudits from the press and from policy wonks, giving him the credentials to run for president. In short, on education, had a high comfort level and felt comfortable working with Democrats.<sup>6</sup> Like the rest of us, politicians learn from history and from their personal histories (Jervis 1976). Governor Bush's political and policy success in Texas education reform provided a model for President Bush as a national education reformer. Further, Bush had success embracing education *standards*. In contrast, his limited foray into school choice, a rapid expansion of charter schooling with insufficient attention to quality, had mixed results (Maranto and Coppeto 2004).

Though Washington Democrats are far to the left of the Texas Democrats Bush knew, on education he and they had much in common. For years Washington policy-makers felt frustration as public schools received more resources without improving student achievement. By the 1990s centrist and even some liberal Democrats were ready to implement accountability based reforms; indeed President Clinton's proposed Goals 2000 resembled NCLB, but was weakened by Congress (McGuin 2006; Rudalevige 2002).

The relative bipartisan consensus on education reform made it easy for President Bush to involve Democrats in policy-making. Much of NCLB came from the New Democratic Progressive Policy Institute, and the original White House point person for NCLB was Democrat

Sandy Kress. Bush himself spent considerable time negotiating the details with key Democratic Congress members, particular Representative George Miller (D, CA) and Senator Ted Kennedy (D, Massachusetts) (McGuin 2006; Rudalevige 2002). The bill's progress was completely unaffected when Republicans lost the Senate with the defection of Senator James Jeffords in May 2001. Of course, as Maranto and Coppeto (2004, 116) write, "compromise is easy when you get your way." Bush gladly bargained away the school choice related parts of NCLB he did not care about to gain the testing and accountability based provisions he valued. President Bush had no need to show flexibility since he got what he wanted. He also had a high level of knowledge of and comfort with education policy, so he could work with opponents without feeling insecure.

Like any complex intergovernmental law, NCLB has not been perfectly implemented by America's 50 states and roughly 14,000 local school districts (Hess and Finn 2007; Maranto and Maranto 2004). Yet the Bush administration has shown flexibility in the law's implementation, particularly since the President replaced Education Secretary Rod Paige with the more politically savvy Margaret Spellings (McGuinn 2006, 167-87). Evidence suggests that the law has succeeded in pushing public schools to raise the academic achievement of traditionally low performing students and reducing the white-minority test score gaps (Casserly 2007).

In short, in Bush's preeminent domestic policy area he found success not by compromise but by working with Democrats who shared his goals to fashion a policy whose time had come (Hochschild 2003; Maranto and Maranto 2004). Bush's knowledge of education and his ebullient personality combined to make him an effective salesman for policies which elites had already by and large accepted.

### ***Smart on Schools; Dumb at War***

Education policy involves Congress and state and local governments. In sharp contrast, as

detailed in chapter 1, presidents have unusual authority and power in foreign and defense policy, magnifying the impact of leader personality. The normal structural advantages presidents hold in foreign policy were further magnified by the national state of emergency after 9-11, an urgency compounded by the shadowy anthrax attacks and Beltway sniper in the months thereafter (Weisberg 2008, 189). In the foreign policy crises, the president could operate as a unitary actor beyond congressional scrutiny.

The desire for cognitive consistency causes people to believe that unsuccessful policies reflect foolish or evil decision-making, but life is more complicated than that (Jervis 1976). So it is with the decision to invade Iraq. Unlike some contributors to this volume, we believe that the decision to invade Iraq was defensible. Bush's failings came less in the decision to go to war than in the lack of a process for that decision, his unwillingness to impose planning for the occupation of Iraq, his inability to recognize severely flawed occupation policies, his inability to face and learn from intelligence failures, and most importantly, in his inability until far too late to hold accountable the war's architects and set a more effective course under more effective personnel. These *inexcusable* failures in part reflect President Bush's psyche.

### ***How History Led to Invasion***

President Bush's critics argue that his administration "cherry picked" intelligence to justify the decision to invade Iraq. Yet critics fail to consider how uncertainty and history shape decision-making. As Jervis (1976) shows in his landmark *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, foreign policy decision-makers must act with relatively little information. To fill in the gaps, they impose models from history to make sense of complex or uncertain information, particularly regarding the intent of foreign leaders---the key variable in defense policy. For example, while hawks might see a failure to counter a potential adversary as

resembling Neville Chamberlain's attempts to appease an expansionist Hitler, a dove might see military mobilization as akin to the risky arms buildups leading to World War I.

Regarding Iraq, several recent historical events shaped the views of President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, Defense Undersecretary Wolfowitz, and other key foreign policy decision-makers. Dembrell (2008), Winik (1996), and the first person account of Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith (2008) show that President Reagan's successful efforts to end the Cold War with the collapse of Communism taught a generation of neoconservative thinkers that assertive foreign policies worked. Beneath this general worldview, specific events shaped perceptions of the Iraqi Baathist regime, as explained by Pollack (2002), as well as Feith (2008) and Diamond (2008):

Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion of Iran, a nation far larger than Iraq, suggested a highly risk acceptant and aggressive personality;

Hussein's invasion of Kuwait after his army was depleted by eight years of war with Iran likewise suggested a high level of risk acceptance coupled with expansionist goals; thus shortly beforehand the CIA had predicted that no invasion would occur;

Shortly after the invasion of Kuwait, the CIA vastly overestimated the difficulty of defeating the Iraqi forces;

In 1990-91 the CIA predicted that Iraq was at least five years from developing nuclear weapons and had few chemical weapons. Inspections immediately after the war showed the regime to have much larger and more advanced WMD programs than predicted;

In 1994 the U.S. and its allies thought that Iraqi WMD programs had been dismantled. Key defectors showed that this was not the case;

On defecting in 1995, Iraqi intelligence chief Wafiq al-Samarra'I said that Hussein

claimed to have learned his lesson from the first Gulf War: Once inspections ended he intended to reconstitute WMD programs, so he could then invade and occupy Kuwaiti and Saudi oil fields and deter American countermeasures.<sup>7</sup>

Save in Kurdistan, the CIA had few or no intelligence assets inside Iraq through most of this period, and thus could not accurately assess the disparate information received from defectors, refugees, signals intelligence, and foreign intelligence agencies. In the 1990s the agency again and again was "caught by surprise with the discovery of some new secret about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction that had been deliberately concealed by Saddam's regime" (Diamond 2008, 11).

In short, the CIA had consistently underestimated the threat posed by the Iraqi regime, while overestimating the difficulties of defeating that regime in battle. These failures led Washington policy-makers generally to doubt CIA estimates regarding Iraq, and to err in the opposite direction. Eventually the CIA did the same. Indeed Bush critic Paul R. Pillar (2008, 233), who questions the decision to invade Iraq, nonetheless admits that the administration was correct to point out that "its perception of Saddam's weapons capacities was shared by the Clinton administration, congressional Democrats, and most other Western governments and intelligence services." Further, Diamond (2008, 13) writes that:

...the Agency's embattled posture during the 9/11 Commission's investigation of its failure to uncover the 9/11 plot made it more politically risky for the CIA to raise skeptical questions about whether the threat posed by Iraq was as serious as the White House alleged. An agency lambasted for missing clues that might have unraveled the deadliest terror plot in history was now handed the mission of

interpreting a threat based on abundant clues about deadly weapons in the hands of a murderous dictator.

In addition, as Douglas Feith (2008) explains in defending his boss, Donald Rumsfeld, after 9/11 the Bush administration had determined to act against likely enemies *before* they were in a position to strike. This particular "Bush doctrine" then had widespread support.

Moreover, Bush's invasion of Afghanistan succeeded. On a matter of great importance and on which nearly all Americans agreed, President Bush set a clear direction and made rational decisions to attack Afghanistan rather than Iraq (as Rumsfeld seemingly wanted), and to act quickly with small forces rather than developing a large buildup over time. Indeed his decision-making in the run up to the Afghan invasion is given high marks by Bush appointee Feith (2008), but also by political scientist Donald Kettl (2003). In Afghanistan, Bush's dauntless decision-making may have paid off. On the other hand, Herspring (2008) and Feith (2008) respectively document the raging political battles within the administration pitting Defense Secretary Rumsfeld against CIA Director George Tenet, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and his own generals even during the Afghan campaign. If Bush was even aware of these conflicts, there is no evidence he used them creatively to gain information from and about subordinates as a multiple advocacy model suggests (George 1980), or lessen conflict to improve teamwork and policy coordination, as an administrative presidency model counsels (Nathan 1983). Indeed even insider Feith (2008, 272) admits "government coordination--- lively debate leading to solid teamwork---was not achieved in the Bush administration" partly since the president did not engage sufficiently to impose a disciplined process on subordinates. Luckily, the failings of the Taliban regime were such that Bush's leadership failures did not endanger initial success in

Afghanistan. Still, better presidential oversight might have killed or captured Osama bin Laden.

One final part of recent history merits discussion. As Feith (2008) writes, the CIA and State Department thought the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan would be far more difficult and require far more troops than Secretary Rumsfeld proposed. As Bush sympathizer Victor David Hanson (2007) suggests, too-rapid success in Afghanistan caused hubris, and attendant failure in Iraq.

In short, the decision to invade Iraq, while perhaps mistaken, was not in and of itself irrational. Given the success of a very small force in Afghanistan, even the decision to invade Iraq with far smaller forces than Pentagon generals proposed could be defended. Had Iraq had extant WMD programs and had the occupation worked well, we might well be writing an essay about how George W. Bush's boldness, optimism, and enthusiastic big picture leadership remade the Middle East *in a good way*.

This was not to be. All too eager to invade, the President proved unwilling or unable to monitor the implementation of his decision. Here the President's decision-making failures are manifest, and they reflect not modern history but Bush psychology. As yet we have no definitive historical accounts of presidential decision-making during the war, in the way that we have for Vietnam, so we cannot discuss the process in detail. Still, from Ricks (2007) Herspring (2008), Pillar (2008), and Pfiffner (2008) and Woodward (2004, 2008), failings include:

The President's failure to impose a "staffing" process to review options for the Iraq regarding whether to invade, the numbers of troops needed for the invasion, nor the proposed length of time and character of the occupation;

The President's failure to inform key members of the administration such as the Secretary of State until months after the decision to go to war;

The President's failure to study Iraq; for example he reportedly did not know about the differences between Sunnis and Shiites;

The President's failure to seriously consider views by administration insiders including General Eric Shinseki, General Tommy Franks, and Colin Powell that the invasion force was too small to occupy Iraq;

The President's failure to consider the views of analysts outside the administration, such as Clinton administration Iraq expert and Iraq hawk Kenneth Pollack (2002), who argued that an invasion force smaller than 300,000 troops could not maintain order, with civil war the most likely outcome;

The President's failure to review occupation plans by the Pentagon and State Department to see if they were in harmony, and could stand up to scrutiny;

The President's failure to reconsider occupation policy after widespread rioting and looting following the fall of Baghdad in April 2003;

The President's failure to demand that the military kill or capture Moqtadr al-Sadr when he began to kill opponents in May 2003: this signaled that occupation forces had no monopoly on violence, leading to civil war;

The President's failure to either work with Iran on Iraq border security, or else use sufficient force to secure the border;

The President's failure to question Ambassador L. Paul Bremer's decision to disband the Iraqi Army, which left thousands of well armed Iraqis unemployed, jump starting the insurgency;

The President's failure to explain to the U.S. public why the administration thought Iraq had WMDs, and why they in fact were not there. This increased elite and popular distrust of the administration;

The President's failure to fundamentally rethink the occupation policy through 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006 as the Iraqi insurgency deepened and widened;

After the 2004 presidential election President Bush kept Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, the architect of failed Iraq policies, while hastening the departure of Secretary of State Powell, who had questioned those policies.

Charitably, one might excuse failings during the 2004 presidential campaign, but not in 2003 in the months after the invasion when the course of occupation could have been righted, or after the 2004 presidential campaign, when reelection was no longer a factor. In short, on countless occasions President Bush failed to impose a decision-making process to gather information, failed to monitor policy to make midcourse corrections, failed to seriously question subordinates, and failed to grapple with policy failures widely reported in the media. These failures showed an inability to consider alternative points of view and new information, a tendency to base policy on personal relationships, and a shocking disdain for detail. Only after the Republicans lost Congress in the 2006 elections, forcing his hand, did the president recognize the Iraqi insurgency, replace Secretary Rumsfeld, and change strategy.

### ***Conclusion: The Perils of Dauntless Decision-making***

In short, President Bush's bold, ebullient personality and bias for action helped bring together Democratic and Republican elites to fundamentally reform American public schools. This may be his greatest legacy. The President's boldness in Afghanistan seemingly succeeded, though his disdain for details limited the scope of that success. Finally, on the signature decision of his administration, President Bush's tendency to make quick decisions, reluctance to admit error, disdain for details and experts, inability to entertain dissenting opinions, and tendency to

categorize opponents as enemies, meant that his administration did not sufficiently plan the invasion of Iraq. Further, he failed to systematically review occupation policy even as countless voices both inside and outside of the administration urged such a review. Here, the President proved cognitively rigid; not heroically steadfast. Nor did he find the strength to fire subordinates who had failed, and to promote less favored subordinates who had in fact proved prescient. Unfortunately it is for these essentially psychological failures of decision and indecision for which President George W. Bush will be best known.

## References

- Baker-Brown, Gloria., Elizabeth J. Ballard, Susan Bluck, Brian deVries, Peter Suedfeld, and Philip E. Tetlock. 1992. "The Conceptual/Integrative Complexity Scoring Manual." In *Motivation and Personality: Handbook of Thematic Content Analysis*, ed. Charles P. Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 400-418.
- Berggren, D. Jason., and Nicol C. Rae. 2006. "Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush: Faith, Foreign Policy, and an Evangelical Presidential Style." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36 (4) (December): 606-32.
- Bush, George W. 1999. *A Charge to Keep*. New York: William Morrow.
- Casserly, Michael. 2007. "America's Great City Schools: Moving in the Right Direction." In *No Remedy Left Behind*, eds. Frederick M. Hess and Chester E. Finn Jr. Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 43-65.
- Coe, Kevin., David Domke, Erica S. Graham, Sue Lockett John, and Victor W. Pickard. 2004. "No Shades of Gray: The Binary Discourse of George W. Bush and an Echoing Press." *Journal of Communication* 54 (2): 234-252.
- Commission on Presidential Debates. 2004. "The Third Bush-Kerry Debate." *Commission on Presidential Debates - Voter Education - Debate Transcripts*, October 13 <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2004d.html> (September 28, 2008).
- Diamond, John. 2008. *The CIA and the Culture of Failure*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Dumbrell, John. 2008. "The Neoconservative Roots of the War in Iraq." In *Intelligence and National Security Policymaking on Iraq: British and American Perspectives*, eds. James P. Pfiffner and Mark Phythian. College Station: Texas A&M Press, 19-

39.

Elovitz, Paul H. 2004. "A Comparative Psychohistorical Approach to Candidates: Bush and Kerry in the 2004 Election." *The Journal of Psychohistory* 32 (2): 109-42.

Etheridge, Lloyd S. 1978. "Personality Effects on American Foreign Policy, 1898-1968: A Test of Interpersonal Generalization Theory." *American Political Science Review* 72 (2): 434-51.

Feith, Douglas J. 2009. *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism*. New York: HarperCollins.

Feaver, Peter D. 2008. Comments during *Roundtable on Casualties, Public Opinion, and the Iraq War* at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

Frank, Justin A. 2004. *Bush on the Couch: Inside the Mind of the President*. New York: Harper Collins.

Frey, Meredith C., and Douglas K. Detterman. 2004. "Scholastic Assessment or g? The Relationship Between the Scholastic Achievement Test and General Cognitive Ability." *Psychological Science* 15 (6): 373-78.

George, Alexander L. 1980. *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*. Boulder: Westview.

Hanson, Victor Davis. 2007. "Anatomy of Iraq: How Did We Get to This Baffling Scenario?" *National Review Online*, March 2. <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=MjdkOTA2NmUxYzkwY2U4NzcyYTYwN2VhZDdmMTkxOWQ=> (September 28, 2008).

Herspring, Dale R. 2008. *Rumsfeld's Wars*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

- Hochschild, Jennifer. 2003. "Rethinking Accountability Politics." In *No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practice of School Accountability*, eds. Paul E. Peterson and Martin R. West. Washington: Brookings Institution, 116-29.
- Immelman, Aubrey. 2001. "Bush Gets Bad Rap on Intelligence." *St. Cloud Times Online*, January 14. <http://csbj.edu/USPP/Election/bush011401.htm> (August 1, 2008).
- Immelman, Aubrey. 2002. "The Political Personality of U.S. President George W. Bush." In *Political Leadership for the New Century: Personality and Behavior Among American Leaders*, eds. Linda O. Valenty and Ofer Feldman. Westport: Praeger, 81-103.
- Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 2000. *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jervis, Robert. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jervis, Robert. 2008. "The Politics and Psychology of Intelligence and Intelligence Reform." In *Intelligence and National Security Policymaking on Iraq: British and American Perspectives*, eds. James P. Pfiffner and Mark Phythian. College Station: Texas A&M Press, 162-71.
- Leudar, Ivan., Victoria Marsland, and Jiří Nekvapil. 2004. "On Membership Categorization: 'Us', 'Them' and 'Doing Violence' in Political Discourse." *Discourse & Society* 15 (2-3): 243-266.
- Maranto, Robert., with Laura Coppeto. 2004. "The Politics Behind Bush's No Child Left Behind: Ideas, Elections, and Top-Down Education Reform." In *George W. Bush:*

- Evaluating the President at Midterm*, eds. Bryan Hilliard, Tom Lansford, and Robert Watson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 105-20.
- Maranto, Robert., and April Maranto. 2004. "Can NCLB Increase Options for Low Income Students? Evidence From Across the States." In *Leaving No Child Left Behind? Options for Kids in Failing Schools*, eds. Frederick Hess and Chester E. Finn. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 63-88.
- McGuinn, Patrick J. 2006. *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Merskin, Debra. 2004. "The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush." *Mass Communication & Society* 7 (2): 157-175.
- Nathan, Richard P. 1983. *The Administrative Presidency*. New York: John Wiley.
- Nelson, Michael. 1993. "The Presidency: Clinton and the Cycle of Politics and Policy." In *The Elections of 1992*, ed. Michael Nelson. Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 125-52.
- Pillar, Paul R. 2008. "Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq." In *Intelligence and National Security Policymaking on Iraq: British and American Perspectives*, eds. James P. Pfiffner and Mark Phythian. College Station: Texas A&M Press, 233-44.
- Pfiffner, James P. 2004. "George W. Bush: Policy, Politics, and Personality." In *New Challenges for the American Presidency*, eds. George C. Edwards III and Phillip John Davies. New York: Longman, 161-181.
- Pfiffner, James P. 2008. "Decisionmaking, Intelligence, and the Iraq War." In *Intelligence And National Security Policymaking on Iraq: British and American Perspectives*, eds. James P. Pfiffner and Mark Phythian. College Station: Texas A&M Press,

213-32.

Pollack, Kenneth M. 2002. *The Threatening Storm*. New York: Random House.

Renshon, Stanley Allen. 2004. *In his Father's Shadow: The Transformations of George W. Bush*. New York: Palgrave/MacMillan.

Ricks, Thomas E. 2007. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. New York: Penguin Books.

Rudalevige, Andrew. 2003. "No Child Left Behind: Forging a Congressional Compromise." In *No Child Left Behind? : The Politics and Practice of School Accountability*, eds. Paul E. Peterson and Martin P. West. Washington: Brookings Institution, 23-54.

Rubenzler, Steven J., and Thomas R. Faschingbauer. 2004. *Personality, Character, and Leadership in the White House: Psychologists Assess the Presidents*. Washington: Potomac Books.

Satel, Sally. 2004. "The Perils of Putting National Leaders on the Couch." *New York Times*, June 29, 2008, F5.

Simonton, Dean Keith. 2002. "Intelligence and Presidential Greatness: Equation Replication Using Updated IQ Estimates." In *Advances in Psychology Research* Vol. 14, ed. Serge P. Shohov. Hauppauge: Nova Science Publishers, 143-53.

Simonton, Dean Keith. 2006. "Presidential IQ, Openness, Intellectual Brilliance and Leadership: Estimates and Correlations for 42 U.S. Chief Executives." *Political Psychology* 27 (4): 511-526.

Suedfeld, Peter., and Dana Charles Leighton. 2002. "Early Communications in the War Against Terrorism: An Integrative Complexity Analysis." *Political Psychology* 23

(3): 585-99.

Suskind, Ron. 2004. *The Price of Loyalty*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Tetlock, Philip E. 1981. "Pre- to Postelection Shifts in Presidential Rhetoric: Impression Management or Cognitive Adjustment?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 41 (2): 207-12.

Thoemmes, Felix J., and Lucian Gideon Conway. 2007. "Integrative Complexity of 41 U.S. Presidents." *Political Psychology* 28 (2): 193-226.

Weisberg, Jacob. 2008. *The Bush Tragedy*. New York: Random House.

Winik, Jay. 1996. *On the Brink*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Woodward, Bob. 2004. *Plan of Attack*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Woodward, Bob. 2008. *The War Within*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

---

<sup>1</sup> We borrow part of the title from the well-known book by James Moore and Wayne Slater, *Bush's Brain: How Karl Rove Made George W. Bush Presidential*, which argued that presidential advisor Karl Rove was the real brains behind the election and presidency of George W. Bush, the 43rd president of the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Also available is Bush's political autobiography, *A Charge to Keep*, published in 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Statistical analyses of the ratings of presidential greatness provided by various experts indicate that they represent "a firm and unified consensus" that is highly reliable and remarkably consistent across raters having different demographic characteristics and political attitudes (Simonton 2002: 144, Simonton 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Although there may be strategic political reasons for leaders to make statements reflecting less complexity than their own views, IC scores do predict a leader's actual policy choices and strategies (Suedfeld and Leighton 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Frank draws many other rather controversial (see Satel 2004) conclusions as well, namely that Bush exhibits some relatively serious psychological symptoms largely stemming from his stern maternal upbringing, competitive relationship with his father, and history of alcoholism, issues often noted by Bush biographers (see Elovitz 2004, Renshon 2004). In addition, Frank (and many others!) have suggested that Bush's decision to run for Governor of

---

Texas and President, and his decision to invade Iraq, were driven in part by his competitive need to live up to his father's expectations and desire to vindicate his father's legacy (see Elovitz 2004). See also Weisberg (2008) on this theme.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed Bush's comfort with education policy was such that in the third Bush-Kerry presidential debate on October 13 2004, Bush turned a question on jobs into a fairly effective disposition on NCLB. See Commission on Presidential Debates (2004) (<http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2004d.html>).

<sup>7</sup> See Pollack (2002, 266-67). It strikes us that while the media frequently report on how silly the Bush administration was to believe intelligence from unreliable sources like the famous "curveball," few acknowledge more credible sources like al-Samarra'i.