

Radical in the White House? A Review Essay

By Lucas Richert

Fred Barnes. *Rebel-in-Chief: Inside the Bold and Controversial Presidency of George W. Bush*. New York: Crown Forum, 2006. ISBN 030-7336492

Bruce Bartlett. *Imposter: How George W. Bush Bankrupted America and Betrayed the Reagan Legacy*. New York: Doubleday Books, 2006. ISBN 978-0385518277

Sidney Blumenthal. *How Bush Rules: Chronicles of a Radical Regime*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006. ISBN 978-0691128887

Sean Wilentz. *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. ISBN 978-0060744809

Clashes over George W. Bush's legacy have begun in earnest. In recent years, authors of all political colorations have crafted books and articles about the appalling mishandling of the U.S. economy, the tepid response to broken levees in New Orleans, and the early failed strategy in Iraq, among a host of other topics. Conservatives, for their part, have been especially introspective about and critical of their agent in the White House. Michael Tanner, a writer at the Cato Institute in Washington, has pilloried the Bush administration's disloyalty to principles held by those on the Right, whereas others in the conservative establishment – for instance, Daniel Casse – have instead strived to rebrand Bush as a pro-government conservative.¹ Debates about George W. Bush's two terms in office will persist for years to come.

A significant element of this debate will surely center on Bush's putative domestic and foreign policy radicalism. In fact, the topic was broached as early as January 2003. According to Bill Kellar, Bush, the ideological torch-bearer of Reaganism, had a high-quality "chance of advancing a radical agenda that Reagan himself could only carry so far."² Not only were political and economic conditions apposite for the continued promotion of a radicalized version of Reaganite doctrines, but the Bush administration in early 2003 proved adept in pivoting off scandal. In foreign affairs, moreover, Bush's Middle East policy was considered a "radically new approach" to the region. According to Daniel Pipes, it was time for Americans to buckle up. Succeeding years were going to be a "wild ride."³ By 2008, a number of authors – including Barnes, Bartlett, Blumenthal, and Wilentz – began to address the thrills and perils of that ride.

In 2006, former Clinton adviser and Democratic supporter, Sidney Blumenthal, contributed to the assessment of Bush. His pugnacious text, *How Bush Rules: Chronicles of a Radical Regime*, charts a period spanning from 2003 to 2006 and is a collection of articles written for the *Guardian* and *Salon*. Wide-ranging, well-informed, and acutely critical, these

¹ Michael Tanner, *Leviathan on the Right: How Big Government Brought Down the Republican Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2007) and Daniel Casse, "Is Bush a Conservative?" *Commentary* (February 2004) 19-26.

² Bill Kellar, "The Radical Presidency of George W. Bush," *New York Times* (26 January 2003) consulted online at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0CE7DE1230F935A15752C0A9659C8B63>

³ Daniel Pipes, "Bush the Radical," *Jerusalem Post* (12 November 2003) consulted online at <http://www.danielpipes.org/1304/bush-the-radical>.

articles are instructive for any student of the Bush years. They touch on, among other things, the unitary executive, dismissal of the legislative branch, Cheney's behind-the-scenes string-pulling, civil liberties skullduggery, rabble-rousing ideological foot soldiers in the media, and a dastardly politicization of war and terror.

Blumenthal begins his appraisal of the Bush years with bluster and bravado. "No one predicted just how radical a president George W. Bush would be," writes Blumenthal. Not his opponents. Not the press. Not even Bush's closest aides suggested that he would be "the most willfully radical president in American history" (Blumenthal, p.1). In case we failed to take heed, Blumenthal recapitulates his bold point. "Nothing like Bush's concerted radicalism," he states, "has ever been seen in the White House" (p.22). Blumenthal also suggests that various parties and circumstances collaborated to enable the advancement of Bush's agenda. In Congress, "Republican radicals" became "indispensable allies" (p.4). The national print and television media, we are told, was a complicit partner because "reality was often too radical and threatening for many in the press to venture covering it" (p.18). Overlaying and reinforcing these trends was terrorist tragedy, for the events on September 11, 2001 presented Bush with pretext and opportunity. "Suddenly," asserts Blumenthal, "his radicalism had an unobstructed path" (p.8).

The esteemed Sean Wilentz, fast friends with Blumenthal, largely agrees. *The Age of Reagan*, according to Wilentz, a Princeton professor, liberal, and erstwhile (Hillary) Clinton supporter, was an era of conservative domination which stretched from the fall of Nixon in 1974 to the Republican electoral clattering in 2006. But in a clever and surprisingly balanced thesis, Reagan is actually embraced by Wilentz as both conservative alpha dog and avatar. Indeed, the former president is given "grudging admiration for his political adroitness."⁴

Wilentz's warm and breezy treatment of Reagan is not transferred to George W. Bush, however, who is basically deemed a failed president practicing a "radicalized form of Reaganism" (p. 434). In summing up the calamitous decline of Republican fortunes in 2008, Wilentz makes no less than seven references to Bush's radicalism. We are told of intransigent proxies in Congress unwilling to negotiate with Democrats across the aisle, as well as the outright abandonment of compassionate conservatism for a zealous pursuit of a doctrinaire agenda. Wilentz also focuses on the promulgation of the unitary executive, which held President Bush had absolute authority over independent federal agencies and "was not bound by congressional oversight or even by law" (p.441). We are asked to accept, therefore, that the Bush administration benefited from and operated in the *Age of Reagan*, though Bush and his cronies practiced a far more ideologically charged version of conservative politics.

Despite such claims, others consider Bush's presidency as neither conservative nor radical enough. Conservative author Bruce Bartlett, for instance, emphatically casts aside any allegiance to the Bush administration. In his 2006 *Imposter: How George W. Bush Bankrupted America and Betrayed the Reagan Legacy*, Bartlett, who worked in the Treasury under both Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush, accuses the younger, wayward Bush of undermining Reaganism by imprudently ramping up federal spending and thereby running up deficits and national debt. "...He is an imposter," asserts Bartlett, "a pretend conservative." "Philosophically, he has more in common with liberals, who see no limits to state power..." (p.1).

⁴ Douglas Brinkley, "The Long Shadow," New York Times Sunday Book Review (May 18, 2008) consulted online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/books/review/Brinkley-t.html>

To be sure, Bush appeased his base by delivering on the promise of substantial tax cuts in 2001 and 2003, yet Bartlett charges the president with being cavalier in restraining needless spending. And he was particularly disgruntled with the pricey Medicare Modernization Act (MMA) of 2003. “The Medicare drug bill may well be the worst piece of legislation ever enacted,” Bartlett claims. In the long-run it would “cost vast sums the nation cannot afford” and “inevitably lead to higher taxes” (p.80). Signing the MMA was emblematic of how the administration systematically botched the federal balance sheet and broke with Reagan’s legacy. It typified, in other words, how the president shirked a tradition of fiscal conservatism – which was itself a red herring – and engaged in an orgy of spending.

Fred Barnes, a writer for the *Weekly Standard* and author of *Rebel-in-Chief*, offers an exasperatingly positive evaluation of the Bush years, and one which departs entirely from the one presented by Bartlett, Blumenthal, and Wilentz. Barnes’s work is no less than an inspirational hosanna. At the core of the 2006 paean is Bush, and specifically Bush’s character. As the title suggests, Bush is portrayed as a pseudo-radical and a lovable rascal: a Hamiltonian, a rugged individual, and a rogue and risk-taker. According to Barnes, these constituent parts amounted to Bush as a pragmatic pro-government conservative. This meant he was not averse to using the mechanisms of government to achieve conservative ends or advance conservative causes. Instead, the president focused on outcomes. And, in a piece of analysis strikingly at odds with Blumenthal and Wilentz, Barnes suggests dogmatism was strangely foreign to Bush. “More often than not, he [Bush] relies on a bigger federal government and billions of taxpayer dollars.” Barnes continues: “To conservatives, this is heresy,” but “to Bush, it is practicality” (p.29).

As the first accounts of the Bush legacy emerge, and as authors sort through the radioactive rubble left behind after eight years, it appears Bush was a radical of various shades. He audaciously and radically bucked the approval of the conservative establishment because he believed in the veracity of his own ideas: on prescription drug entitlements, education policy, and Supreme Court nominee Harriet Miers, just to name three examples. Yet Bush also oversaw the enactment of hefty tax cuts, first in 2001 and then again in 2003, and these measures – historic in size and scope – symbolized to moderates and liberals a radicalized adaptation of President Reagan’s economic conservatism. Moreover, after his “bullhorn moment” at Ground Zero in 2001, Bush embarked on a radical foreign policy that not only expanded the wartime powers of the presidential office but also included the sanctification of torture and domestic spying.

This stimulating and provocative selection of George W. Bush books thus asks us to acknowledge wildly disparate views of Bush and his administration. The first, a macabre vision, holds Bush as an obdurate radical ideologue who oversaw the precipitous economic and moral decline of the nation. The second, by contrast, casts Bush as a transgressive conservative, a man driven not by dogma, but rather by a desire for results, for positive conservative outcomes in American society – and by whatever means necessary, including government intervention. His radicalism thus lay in his willingness to defy the shrill cries of his own base. Lastly, Bartlett’s forceful argument, that Bush was a disloyal scoundrel – in effect, a liberal – condemns the president for his very lack of radicalism. The debate continues.

In the final pages of Bob Woodward’s 2004 book *Plan of Attack*, George W. Bush, asked how history would judge the war in Iraq, responds: “History. We don’t know. We’ll all be dead.” The president was fundamentally correct. We have no concrete idea how the account of Bush’s eight years in office will unfold. We cannot know with confidence whether Bush will be judged a radical conservative or a radical pro-government conservative,

or neither. Even so, because the literature remains so radically variable, it's safe to speculate that the debate over Bush's legacy will be marked not by lassitude but verve. "The presidency," Bush told Woodward, "that's just the way it is."⁵

⁵ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004) 443.