

George W. Bush's "Decision Points": An Exercise in Self-justification

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All political memoirs are, to some extent, an exercise in self-justification, especially those by presidents and prime ministers – an obvious point, but true nonetheless. The original idea behind memoirs was to provide thoughtful reflection on past events and actions. Now they function more like a preemptive strike. Politicians use their memoirs to define their role in history before historians do it for them.

George W. Bush, the 43rd President of the United States, waited almost two years before sitting down to pen his memoirs. The finished product, "Decision Points," is 497 pages divided among 14 chapters.

Each of the 14 chapters deals with a "decision point" in Bush's life and presidency, when he had to bang his fist on the desk and do something big, something statesmanlike, or hide under the desk and consign America to eternal shame – the greatest possible sin for a patriotic American, as Bush makes clear in almost every chapter.

The highlights of Bush's memoirs are 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, the torture of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Hurricane Katrina, and the Wall Street crash and the ensuing global financial crisis. Bush also recalls how Israel asked him to bomb Syrian and Iranian nuclear facilities and how he wisely refused, having weighed all the pros and cons.

The main thrust of Bush's argument is as predictable as it is uninteresting – by and large he made the right decisions and the world (Afghanistan, Iraq, the Middle East, America and Europe) has only benefited from them. No one knows what the world would look like today were it not for Bush and his decisions.

In an interview on an American television network to promote the book, Bush said: "I was charged with protecting America. Those decisions I made were necessary... I don't care about perceptions. I served. I gave it my all. I'm a content man."

Presidential memoirs as presidential pardon

George Bernard Shaw, a man of great wit and wisdom, once said: "When you read a biography remember that the truth is never fit for publication." Readers interested in memoirs as a vehicle for absolution may be disappointed by Bush's offering, which has already been widely excerpted on the web. There are no revelations in the book for the simple fact that Bush has already acknowledged – with major caveats – what he considers the mistakes of his presidency. (For instance, his administration was wrong about WMDs in

Iraq, but America rid the world of Saddam Hussein and this justifies everything).

Bush claims he's not concerned with how he's seen, but this is obviously an exaggeration. You can't change the past, but politicians who pick up a pen upon leaving office clearly want to rewrite it in some way.

During the entire postwar period, not a single U.S. president has been bold enough to produce memoirs with real historical, not to mention artistic, value. Which isn't to say that all presidential memoirs are irredeemably bad. There are times in Bush's memoirs when you can hear his voice, his distinct style of speaking, but for the most part the writing is, in the words of one American reviewer, "competent, readable and flat." It will be an interesting read for researchers of the U.S. presidency and presidential psychology, but that's it. Otherwise, it is surprisingly boring.

The list of memorable presidential memoirs is short. It includes Ulysses S. Grant's "Personal Memoirs" (published in 1885-1886) and two volumes by Harry Truman (1945-1953) "Year of Decisions" and "Years of Trial and Hope." Grant described his military career in his memoirs, and said next to nothing about his presidency. Both these memoirs were very successful, and the secret to their success was simple: both were written in the hope of making money and settling debts. Grant and Truman had to write something that would sell, something interesting and even useful to current and future readers, not 497 pages of self-justification.

Who needs Bush's legacy?

It only seems like presidential memoirs are about the past. Bush's memoirs are more about the present and the future. There is no doubt about that, especially considering that they were published after the U.S. midterm elections on November 2, in which Republicans took back the House of Representatives and won most of the governorships up for grabs, shifting the country substantially to the right. Bush's legacy is still very much alive. Barack Obama inherited two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the worst recession since WWII, and enormous deficits from Bush and his Republican allies in Congress.

If Republicans want their ally to come to the White House in 2012 (the unofficial election campaign kicks off next year), they must rehabilitate Bush's image. This is the purpose of "Decision Points." Unless the Republicans can sell this new Bush to voters - a patriot who admits his mistakes but never apologizes for giving his all to his country - their chances of taking back the White House will be in serious jeopardy.

Memoirs are just the beginning of the rehabilitation process. The cornerstone will be laid at Bush's new presidential library in Dallas on November 16. The library will feature a museum and exhibitions devoted to 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention all the trappings of a genuine American upbringing. Anyone who doubts that Bush's image can be rehabilitated in four short years should think again. To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, reading can turn a man into a knight or a lunatic.

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