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Unradical Son George W. Bush isn't the fire-breathing reactionary liberals love to hate by Peter Berkowitz

DEMOCRATS MAY DISAGREE among themselves about how the country should be governed, but they are largely in agreement about how George W. Bush has misgoverned.

By recklessly cutting taxes, President Bush has enriched the wealthy and neglected the poor, sent the federal budget deficit to record heights, and imposed a colossal financial burden on the coming generation. He has revived the culture wars by flaunting his Christian faith and by promoting traditional values. He has undermined public schools by supporting school choice. He has eroded the wall of separation between church and state by seeking federal funding for faith-based charities. He threatens to reverse decades of progress in civil rights by packing the judiciary with right-wing extremists. He has alienated our European allies with his crude cowboy diplomacy and provided a legitimate basis for anti-Americanism around the world. And he has knowingly deceived the American people in a matter of grave national importance by resting his case for war against Iraq on trumped-up charges about weapons of mass destruction.

But the portrait of President Bush as a fiend bent on destroying all that progressives hold dear is a partisan caricature. It prevents them from recognizing that Bush's priorities differ from theirs not because he rejects their deepest principles --- individual freedom and equality before the law --- but because he espouses a conservative interpretation of them. Moreover, his is not a radical conservatism. By maintaining high levels of domestic federal spending, intervening cautiously in the country's continuing cultural conflicts, and waging a war to remove the threat posed by Saddam Hussein that was also consistent with the imperatives of "humanitarian intervention," Bush has governed in a manner that should not leave progressives foaming with rage.

Bush's conservatism is certainly less rigid and doctrinaire than that of Newt Gingrich and his minions, who swept to power in 1994 and, in a most unconservative spirit, sought to remake the federal government by drastically reducing its size. Bush seems to have more or less made his peace with a New Deal-style welfare state. With Senator Edward M. Kennedy, he supports extending federal oversight of public schools; in line with the hopes of many Democrats, he proposed in his 2003 State of the Union address an additional \$400 billion over 10 years to strengthen Medicare; and going beyond Clinton administration rhetoric, he also asked Congress to commit \$15 billion over the next five years to fight AIDS in Africa.

Bush's conservatism is less moralistic, more live-and-let-live, than that of many traditional conservatives. In the culture wars, Bush generally prefers quiet diplomacy. During the 2000 campaign he had little to say about abortion, affirmative action, or gay rights. True, early in his administration he did order the withholding of US funds from organizations abroad that performed abortions. But this year, even though the administration filed briefs opposing the University of Michigan's affirmative action programs, he ended up giving low-key approval to the Supreme Court's recent decision upholding the Law School's affirmative action approach.

While he supported anti-sodomy laws as governor of Texas, he did not object when the Supreme Court struck them down last month. However, with the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts expected to rule on gay marriage any day now, Bush may be drawn into a painful public struggle. In fact, he already has been, affirming at a recent news conference both his respect for gays as individuals and his opposition to gay marriage.

Bush's preference for cultural diplomacy may reflect in part a political calculation, an effort to appeal to the sizeable center in American politics that has been critical to victory in the last three presidential elections. But whatever his motives, he has been assiduous in this diplomacy. He appointed Michael Guest, an openly gay State Department official, to be ambassador of Romania. He named Dana Gioia, a serious poet, to head the National Endowment for the Arts (and head off conservative critics of the institution). In the dark days following Sept. 11 he declared Islam a "religion of peace." And when Trent Lott clumsily endorsed segregationist sentiments, Bush issued a strong rebuke that made Lott's position as Senate majority leader untenable.

Moreover, having appointed the first black secretary of state and the first black (and female) national security adviser, Bush has provided exemplary role models in the fight for racial and sexual equality. The familiar image on the evening news of a Republican president with strong ties to big business and Southern majorities flanked by and entirely at ease with Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice does more to promote respect for the individual based on the content of his or her character than do all the schemes for national conversations about race and all the campus seminars and consciousness-raising programs combined.

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When it comes to economics, the furious criticism that the Bush tax cuts provoke often disguises the ideas or sensibility that inform them. Bush is not cutting taxes to pay off the rich. Rightly or wrongly, he believes that cutting taxes almost always leads to a growth in production and consequently to an increase in jobs, which benefits everyone. These beliefs are rooted in a confidence in the market and in the ability of individuals to make the best decisions about how their income ought to be spent, coupled with a distrust of distant government bureaucrats and their ability to spend money and administer programs wisely on other people's behalf (a distrust that the president has apparently overcome in matters of education and health care).

Thoughtful progressives who recognize the power of tax cuts to stimulate the economy in the short term nevertheless blame the president for failing to explain how we will pay for them over the long term. Meanwhile, conservatives such as George Will and the editors of National Review observe with some chagrin that in addition to his tax cuts and increases in national security spending after Sept. 11, Bush has significantly increased discretionary domestic spending.

While Bush has not yet accomplished much on behalf of school choice and faith-based initiatives, his approach demonstrates his preference for market-based solutions to genuine progressive challenges. Taking seriously decades of gross failure by inner-city public schools, Bush favors giving parents of students at the worst-performing schools a choice by providing them with vouchers that they can use at alternative schools, private or public. And embracing the role of nongovernmental organizations in delivering relief to the disadvantaged, he seeks to insure that religious organizations are not excluded from receiving federal funds to support their charitable activities.

As for Bush's nominees to the federal bench, a few may raise ideological concerns. But contrary to the sky-is-falling panic promoted by special interest groups, progressive editorial pages, and Democratic members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, the Bush nominees do not threaten our constitutional order.

Bush's nominees certainly have been conservatives who generally believe that federal judges should be bound by explicit statements in the Constitution and well-settled precedents rather than abstract values elicited from the Constitution and Supreme Court decisions. They tend to take a keen interest in federalism, stressing the need to protect state authority from encroaching congressional legislation. Yet federal Court of Appeals judges, the subjects of all the fuss so far, do not have license to override Supreme Court precedent on abortion or affirmative action or on any other question; their task is to apply it. In hard cases, their judicial philosophy and political outlook matters. But the hard cases with large political consequences generally get decided by the Supreme Court. And it is telling that progressives' concern that Bush will appoint another Justice in the mold of Scalia and Thomas is scarcely greater than conservative worries that Bush will nominate a moderate in the manner of Kennedy and O'Connor.

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It is national security, however, which has dominated the Bush administration and the debate over its achievements and failures. Conservatives, believing that the world is a dangerous place in which the struggle for preeminence and power determines a good part of state conduct, generally make a priority of it.

What Sept. 11 changed was the Bush administration's understanding of the dangers that America faces. A conservative president who had campaigned against nation-building on the grounds that the US military should be reserved for fighting to protect America's vital security interests came to see that it was in those interests to eliminate, where necessary by force of arms, dictatorships that harbored or supported terrorism.

Nothing learned in the last year has changed the calculus that led Vice President Cheney to declare in an August 2002 speech that, in the case of Iraq, "the risk of inaction is far greater than the risk of action." The evidence may be lacking that Saddam had recently sought uranium in Africa. Yet his ambitions are longstanding and have prompted widespread concern.

In February of 1998, when Saddam impeded the work of United Nations inspectors (ultimately causing them to leave Iraq), President Clinton argued that to allow Iraq's dictator, in defiance of UN resolutions, to continue to develop weapons of mass destruction would encourage him to "conclude that the international community has lost its will." Clinton continued: "He will then conclude that he can go right on and do more to rebuild an arsenal of devastating destruction. And some day, some way, I guarantee you, he'll use that arsenal."

Today, Bush's critics, usually upholders of international law, rarely acknowledge the manifestly inaccurate and incomplete accounting of WMD that Saddam submitted to the UN Security Council in December 2002. This put him in clear material breach of Resolution 1441, which was unanimously passed by the Security Council one month before. On the Bush administration's reasonable reading, Saddam's defiance of 1441's terms authorized the use of force to disarm him, and suggested he had WMD to hide.

Remarkably, some of the most vocal critics of Operation Iraqi Freedom are the same progressives who throughout the 1990s championed the idea that the United States had a purely humanitarian obligation to deploy its military around the world to stop genocide and other crimes against humanity. Yet when US-led coalition forces (now representing 30 nations) went to war to end the 30-year reign of terror of a monstrous dictator who made Slobodan Milosevic look like an amateur thug, these same people generally stood by silently, or made a show of wringing their hands over the sanctity of Iraqi sovereignty and the integrity of the international system.

Of course, progressives are not alone in taking offense over how President Bush has governed. Some conservatives too have been dismayed, particularly by what they have derisively referred to as Bush's "big government conservatism." Yet as his administration makes its mistakes, rolls with the punches, and adapts to changing circumstances, the president reveals himself to be a pragmatic conservative who knows in his gut that it is a liberal welfare state that he wishes to reform, and to conserve. This will continue to discomfit purists on both sides. And it may prove attractive to a majority in 2004, not only in the Electoral College but in the popular vote as well.

Peter Berkowitz teaches at George Mason University School of Law and is a research fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. He serves as a part-time consultant to the President's Council on Bioethics.

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