

# The Insanity of Bush Hatred

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By

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Hating the president is almost as old as the republic itself. The people, or various factions among them, have indulged in Clinton hatred, Reagan hatred, Nixon hatred, LBJ hatred, FDR hatred, Lincoln hatred, and John Adams hatred, to mention only the more extravagant hatreds that we Americans have conceived for our presidents.

But Bush hatred is different. It's not that this time members of the intellectual class have been swept away by passion and become votaries of anger and loathing. Alas, intellectuals have always been prone to employ their learning and fine words to whip up resentment and demonize the competition. Bush hatred, however, is distinguished by the pride intellectuals have taken in their hatred, openly endorsing it as a virtue and enthusiastically proclaiming that their hatred is not only a rational response to the president and his administration but a mark of good moral hygiene.



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This distinguishing feature of Bush hatred was brought home to me on a recent visit to Princeton University. I had been invited to appear on a panel to debate the ideas in Princeton professor and American Prospect editor Paul Starr's excellent new book, "Freedom's Power: The True Force of Liberalism." To put in context Prof. Starr's grounding of contemporary progressivism in the larger liberal tradition, I recounted to the Princeton audience an exchange at a dinner I hosted in Washington in June 2004 for several distinguished progressive scholars, journalists, and policy analysts.

To get the conversation rolling at that D.C. dinner -- and perhaps mischievously -- I wondered aloud whether Bush hatred had not made rational discussion of politics in Washington all but impossible. One guest responded in a loud, seething, in-your-face voice, "What's irrational about hating George W. Bush?" His vehemence caused his fellow progressives to gather around and lean in, like kids on a playground who see a fight brewing.

Reluctant to see the dinner fall apart before drinks had been served, I sought to ease the tension. I said, gently, that I rarely found hatred a rational force in politics, but, who knows, perhaps this was a special case. And then I tried to change the subject.

But my dinner companion wouldn't allow it. "No," he said, angrily. "You started it. You make the case that it's not rational to hate Bush." I looked around the table for help. Instead, I found faces keen for my response. So, for several minutes, I held forth, suggesting that however wrongheaded or harmful to the national interest the president's policies may have seemed to my progressive colleagues, hatred tended to cloud judgment, and therefore was a

passion that a citizen should not be proud of being in the grips of and should avoid bringing to public debate. Propositions, one might have thought, that would not be controversial among intellectuals devoted to thinking and writing about politics.

But controversial they were. Finally, another guest, a man I had long admired, an incisive thinker and a political moderate, cleared his throat, and asked if he could interject. I welcomed his intervention, confident that he would ease the tension by lending his authority in support of the sole claim that I was defending, namely, that Bush hatred subverted sound thinking. He cleared his throat for a second time. Then, with all eyes on him, and measuring every word, he proclaimed, "I . . . hate . . . the . . . way . . . Bush . . . talks."

And so, I told my Princeton audience, in the context of a Bush hatred and a corollary contempt for conservatism so virulent that it had addled the minds of many of our leading progressive intellectuals, Prof. Starr deserved special recognition for keeping his head in his analysis of liberalism and progressivism. Then I got on with my prepared remarks.

But as at that D.C. dinner in late spring of 2004, so again in early autumn 2007 at dinner following the Princeton panel, several of my progressive colleagues seized upon my remarks against giving oneself over to hatred. And they vigorously rejected the notion. Both a professor of political theory and a nationally syndicated columnist insisted that I was wrong to condemn hatred as a passion that impaired political judgment. On the contrary, they argued, Bush hatred was fully warranted considering his theft of the 2000 election in Florida with the aid of the Supreme Court's decision in *Bush v. Gore*; his politicization of national security by making the invasion of Iraq an issue in the 2002 midterm elections; and his shredding of the Constitution to authorize the torture of enemy combatants.

Of course, these very examples illustrate nothing so much as the damage hatred inflicts on the intellect. Many of my colleagues at Princeton that evening seemed not to have considered that in 2000 it was Al Gore who shifted the election controversy to the courts by filing a lawsuit challenging decisions made by local Florida county election supervisors. Nor did many of my Princeton dinner companions take into account that between the Florida Supreme Court and the U.S. Supreme Court, 10 of 16 higher court judges -- five of whom were Democratic appointees -- found equal protection flaws with the recount scheme ordered by the intermediate Florida court. And they did not appear to have pondered Judge Richard Posner's sensible observation, much less themselves sensibly observe, that while indeed it was strange to have the U.S. Supreme Court decide a presidential election, it would have been even stranger for the election to have been decided by the Florida Supreme Court.

As for the 2002 midterm elections, it is true that Mr. Bush took the question of whether to use military force against Iraq to the voters, placing many Democratic candidates that fall in awkward positions. But in a liberal democracy, especially from a progressive point of view,

aren't questions of war and peace proper ones to put to the people -- as Democrats did successfully in 2006?

And lord knows the Bush administration has blundered in its handling of legal issues that have arisen in the war on terror. But from the common progressive denunciations you would never know that the Bush administration has rejected torture as illegal. And you could easily overlook that in our system of government the executive branch, which has principal responsibility for defending the nation, is in wartime bound to overreach -- especially when it confronts on a daily basis intelligence reports that describe terrifying threats -- but that when checked by the Supreme Court the Bush administration has, in accordance with the system, promptly complied with the law.

In short, Bush hatred is not a rational response to actual Bush perfidy. Rather, Bush hatred compels its progressive victims -- who pride themselves on their sophistication and sensitivity to nuance -- to reduce complicated events and multilayered issues to simple matters of good and evil. Like all hatred in politics, Bush hatred blinds to the other sides of the argument, and constrains the hater to see a monster instead of a political opponent.

Prof. Starr shows in "Freedom's Power" that tolerance, generosity, and reasoned skepticism are hallmarks of the truly liberal spirit. His analysis suggests that the problem with progressives who have succumbed to Bush hatred is not their liberalism; it's their betrayal of it. To be sure, Prof. Starr rejects Bush administration policies and thinks conservatives have the wrong remedies for what ails America today. Yet at the same time his analysis suggests, if not a cure for those who have already succumbed, at least a recipe for inoculating others against hating presidents to come.

The recipe consists above all in recognizing that constitutional liberalism in America "is the common heritage of both modern conservatives and modern liberals, as those terms are understood in the Anglo-American world," writes Prof. Starr. We are divided not by our commitment to the Constitution but by disagreements -- often, to be sure, with a great deal of blood and treasure at stake -- over how to defend that Constitution and secure its promise of liberty under law.

The conflict between more conservative and more liberal or progressive interpretations of the Constitution is as old as the document itself, and a venerable source of the nation's strength. It is wonderful for citizens to bring passion to it. Recognizing the common heritage that provides the ground for so many of the disagreements between right and left today will encourage both sides, if not to cherish their opponents, at least to discipline their passions and make them an ally of their reason.

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