



Bush and the “Objective Historians” (II)

By: Daniel Larison- July 2, 2013

Matt Fay has written a thoughtful response to yesterday’s post on Bush’s legacy:

Which brings up the second reason Larison’s conclusion may be overstated: history is not static—it is dynamic and how historians interpret the past changes based on a variety of different factors. As noted previously, new sources will provide new opportunities to reassess the performance of the Bush administration. As time puts some distance between historians and the Bush administration some of the animus currently directed at it will begin to wane. Changing political dynamics can change the way past events are viewed....In another sense, imagine a situation in which Iraq becomes a viable and thriving democracy [stop laughing, I said “imagine”...]. Historians would have to view the Bush administration’s record, so dominated by its ill-conceived Mesopotamian adventure, in light of that development.

Fay makes a fair point that future historians will have access to some sources that we don’t have, but I would add that this can and does cut both ways. There may be new evidence that later revisionists can use to portray the Bush administration as more successful than most of its contemporaries believed, but new evidence could just as easily expose things that would cause people to revise their opinion of Bush in the other direction. As later historians gain more distance and perspective on the 2000s, the extent of the U.S. overreaction to perceived and real foreign threats will become more obvious, and the role of the administration in stoking the public’s paranoia and fear about these threats will probably seem less understandable.

Of course, Fay is right that past events can be reinterpreted in light of later experiences or in order to serve the political purposes of a later period. It is always possible that later generations will view the Bush era more positively because of subsequent events, and some of the precedents created by Bush might very well be used by later presidents to justify their own actions, but this suggests that Bush’s best chance for rehabilitation comes from nostalgia or the propaganda needs of later administrations rather than a more “balanced” assessment of his presidency. Depending on how the U.S.-Indian relationship develops in the decades to come, Bush’s success in cultivating closer ties with India could be seen as a more important part of his legacy than it appears today. Then again, that wouldn’t be a significant revision of the contemporary judgment of Bush’s record on India. Even if Iraq eventually becomes a “viable and thriving democracy,” that outcome would likely be so far removed from the Iraq war in time as to be unrelated to U.S. policy in the early 2000s.

Earlier leaders are sometimes rehabilitated for the specific purpose of rebuking later ones. Indeed, George W. Bush’s tenure was very good for improving the reputations of Eisenhower

and of Bush's father, since both are seen as representing the sort of competent Republican leadership so lacking in the last Republican president. There could be a later president with such a deplorable record that it makes people long for the leadership of George W. Bush, but somehow I doubt it. Once most leaders acquire a reputation for incompetence, failure, or wrongdoing, those reputations usually don't get better with age.

The strongest part of Fay's argument is that historians have generally rewarded presidents for using and expanding the powers of the office:

Moreover, as the Cato Institute's Gene Healy has noted on multiple occasions, historians studying the presidency most often reward those who expand the power of the office—a category of president to which W. would certainly belong.

This is probably the best chance that Bush has to be remembered as a significant president. However, historians like to reward presidents for political and policy successes even more, and Bush doesn't appear to have many of these in his record.