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He's Baaack: George W. Bush as Freddy Krueger

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[The Nightmare Never Ends: The Official History of Freddy Krueger and the Nightmare on Elm Street Films](#)^[3] Like the star of a third-rate horror film, George W. Bush is back, scaring the public. The former president has a memoir to sell, and he's busy defending his militaristic and profligate presidency, highlighted by his attempt to turn America's chief executive into an elective despot. It's a record Americans should reject today as firmly as they did when he left office nearly two years ago.

Presidents often appear better when looking backward. Consider hapless and unelected Gerald Ford. When judged by the standard of his successor, Jimmy Carter, the natural reaction was: bring back Jerry. President George W. Bush is benefiting from a similar effect. As President Barack Obama nationalizes health care, increases spending, expands the Afghan war and threatens civil liberties, some people are asking: what's not to like about the Bush presidency?

A lot, actually.

President Bush was not an evil man, in contrast to the image spun by his severest critics. However, he was temperamentally unsuited to the presidency. Not stupid, he was something worse: willfully ignorant. He did not view lack of knowledge as any reason not to bomb, invade, and occupy other nations. Indeed, he almost joyfully tried violent social engineering in lands about which he knew nothing.

George W. Bush treated appointments to government like filling fraternity offices. Knowledge naturally was irrelevant, along with competence and experience. Instead, President Bush preferred buddies, political supporters, sycophants, people to whom he took a superficial liking and above all loyalists.

Who else would have insisted that appointees to the occupation authority in Baghdad have backed his 2000 campaign and hold the “correct” view on abortion? Or would have nominated the egregiously ill-prepared Michael Brown and Harriet Miers to the Federal Emergency Management Administration and Supreme Court, respectively?

The president also judged people and information by whether they matched his ideological presuppositions. For instance, those who suggested that events in Iraq failed to match his rosy scenario earned dismissal as defeatists. George W. Bush appeared to be congenitally unable to reconsider bad decisions, even when new information contradicted what he believed was supposed to have happened.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that when “The Decider” decided the results were usually ugly.

President Bush’s philosophy was even worse than his mode of decision making. Contrary to his rhetoric, he abandoned most conservative—or at least limited government—principles once he took office. It was a presidency that only a committed statist could truly love.

First was spending. George W. Bush turned a large surplus into a huge deficit. The Congressional Budget Office reported a \$13 trillion deterioration in federal finances over ten years. The single biggest factor after economic readjustments was increased outlays.

This Republican president and Congress actually increased domestic discretionary spending faster than did President Lyndon Johnson and his Democratic Congress. The GOP initiated the biggest expansion of the welfare state in four decades, the Medicare drug benefit, with an unfunded liability of \$13 trillion—about the same cost as President Barack Obama’s health care reform bill. It was hard to find a program for which expenditures did not go up under President Bush.

Moreover, much of the spending blamed on President Obama began under Bush. On President Bush’s watch the federal government bailed out Bear Stearns, creating an expectation on Wall Street of further bailouts. The Bush administration terrorized a reluctant Congress into passing TARP, the most important effect of which was indirectly bailing out Goldman Sachs. Bush officials admitted that there was no “metric” to justify the \$700 billion program: they just wanted a “big number.” And it was President Bush who took a plan to purchase “toxic” financial assets and turned it into bank and auto-industry bailouts.

While President Bush was not responsible for the roughly \$800 billion Democratic “stimulus” legislation passed in early 2009, he pushed smaller and no less foolish initiatives during this presidency. Pork barrel spending peaked at \$35 billion annually—under the Republicans. The Bush administration’s faith-based initiative turned into an expensive attempt to buy GOP political support from African-American churches.

Second, George W. Bush believed in limited government and federalism only when convenient. His “No Child Left Behind” legislation expanded national control over education. The nation’s founders would never have imagined federal funding for marriage counseling. Backed by President Bush, the U.S. Congress intervened in the tragic Terri Schiavo case, overturning

multiple state-court decisions. The president believed in no limits to national political power.

Third, George W. Bush adopted promiscuous but incompetent war making as the basis of his foreign policy. After mistakenly downplaying the threat posed by al-Qaeda, the Bush administration treated terrorism as an existential threat akin to that of nuclear war. For good cause, the administration ousted the Taliban government after 9/11, but provided too few troops to capture al-Qaeda's leaders, blithely accepted deadly Pakistani double-dealing in Afghanistan, and prematurely withdrew U.S. forces in order to attack Iraq.

As a result, we are foolishly engaged in bloody but ineffective nation building nine years later. In Iraq the president treated the most serious decision which a president can make as a casual choice, akin to deciding eligibility for federal grants. He and his top aides simply assumed success, ignoring facts on the ground, failing to plan for obvious contingencies, disdainng outside advice, providing too few military personnel, and attempting to rule Iraq from Washington. While extravagantly praising U.S. troops, the Bush administration failed to properly equip those sent into combat. American personnel suffered many unnecessary casualties before they had sufficient body armor and up-armored Humvees.

Iran and North Korea were treated with similar frivolity. The president disdained not just negotiation, but even contact with these troublesome regimes, foreclosing any possibility of peaceful accommodation. Had not the president's Iraq adventure turned out so badly, the administration might have initiated one or more additional wars.

And turn out badly Iraq did. There were no weapons of mass destruction to find or terrorists to root out. Yet nearly five thousand American and other allied military personnel have died. Tens of thousands have been wounded, many of them permanently maimed. The best estimates of the number of dead Iraqis start at around 200,000 and climb upwards to a million. Millions of Iraqis have been displaced; the indigenous Christian community has been largely destroyed. Violence remains high and Iraq's future remains unclear at best.

At the same time, Iran has been significantly strengthened and anti-American terrorists have gained another grievance with which to recruit acolytes. Other policies, such as support for Israel's apartheid-like rule in the occupied territories and opposition to Mideast democracy when the wrong people win, as in Gaza, added to Muslim hostility. In Iraq, the United States so far has squandered \$750 billion, with at least another trillion dollars or more to be spent caring for the American wounded in coming years. U.S. military forces have been weakened. President Bush unintentionally showed the world the limits of Washington's influence: the unipower can't even resolve an electoral crisis in its new client state.

Finally, the Bush administration demonstrated the truth of Randolph Bourne's admonition that war is the health of the state. In the name of promoting public safety, President Bush acted to destroy republican government. The hallmark of his administration was the claim that in wartime the president is the equivalent of a monarch or even dictator.

According to the president, he could declare an endless war in which the United States was the battlefield. He could initiate wide-ranging surveillance activities, searches and seizures, and arrests with no oversight or accountability of any sort, either from Congress or the courts. The president could order the arrest of an American citizen on American soil and hold him incommunicado—for as long as the president thought appropriate. The president could order the assassination of another American citizen without being second-guessed by anyone. The president could send American military and intelligence forces to promiscuously grab, capture and kidnap potential adversaries overseas, many for a bounty, and hold them without a hearing

indefinitely, even if that meant forever. And if the president so desired, he could order that they be tortured.

The U.S. prosecuted Japanese military officers who employed waterboarding against American prisoners during World War II. But the president could direct its use against America's adversaries—or people accused by someone somewhere of being America's adversaries—irrespective of U.S. or international law.

Perhaps most striking was President Bush's assertion that these powers were both unreviewable and perpetual. So long as he, or any other president, decided that the "war on terrorism" continued, America's chief executive was an elective dictator in all but name. It was an extraordinary claim to make for someone elected in a republic to be chief executive of a government supposedly of limited and enumerated powers.

"Miss me yet?" ask the billboards of George W. Bush. Not just no, but hell no. His is not a legacy which can be remade. Not after the passage of two years. Not after the passage of twenty years. Or more.

President Bush should go back into retirement in Texas. He can live out his life, unlike those who have died in his wars. George W. Bush might not be the worst president in U.S. history—there are many impressive contenders for that title. But he surely is one of the worst. If the GOP hopes to regain its role as America's governing party, it should look at the Bush administration to learn what not to do.

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