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## George Bush ends his purdah with a memoir, a library and Oprah

Former US president's first account of time in White House will be 'honest and direct about flaws'

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Ed Pilkington in Dallas  
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George Bush greets well-wishers upon his return to Texas in 2009 after completing two terms in the White House. Photograph: Tom Pennington/Getty Images

Amid the Republican resurgence that has been building ahead of next week's midterm elections, one key conservative figure has been conspicuously absent.

His public appearances have been limited to bike rides and a baseball game or two, he has avoided endorsing candidates and instead kept himself secluded in the sleepy Dallas suburb of Preston Hollow.

In a couple of weeks, however, the mystery of the disappearing former president is likely to be solved. After two years of an enforced purdah, [George Bush](#) will come out into the open.

On 9 November he will give his first public account of his tumultuous two-terms in office in the form of a memoir, *Decision Points*. Its publication has been timed to hit the shelves long enough after the elections to avoid any accusation of interference but close enough to profit from the euphoria the Republican troops are likely to be feeling from their anticipated drubbing of the Democrats.

Interviews with Oprah Winfrey and on the NBC Today show will give the 43rd president the kind of exposure he has rigorously avoided since he was spirited away from Washington aboard the Marine One helicopter on 20 January 2009. "I have zero desire, just so you know, to be in the limelight," he said in Chicago last week at one of his sparse speaking engagements.

The book is one element of an intricately choreographed attempt on Bush's part to define his own legacy. On 16 November there will be a groundbreaking at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas of his presidential library, which will form the core of a

20,000 square foot Bush Centre that will also incorporate a meeting space and an institute tasked with finding Bush-style solutions to global challenges.

As a taste of the cornucopia of George Bush that is to come, a mini-exhibition of some of the most evocative memorabilia of his time in office has just been opened at the university.

Unsurprisingly, 9/11 features prominently, with a display of the original handwritten notes he made in his favoured black Sharpie pen for his first press statement on the morning of the attacks: "Today we have had a nat'l tragedy. 2 airplanes have crashed into the World Trade Centre ... Terrorism against Amer will not succeed."

There's the megaphone he used three days later as he stood on top of the rubble in Ground Zero. "I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you," he said. Beside it is the ball he pitched that same Autumn at Yankee Stadium at the start of game three of the World Series.

If 9/11 was his finest hour, there are also reminders of more controversial decisions. A brick from the Taliban leader Mullah Omar's compound in Afghanistan is displayed next to the 9mm Glock pistol found in Saddam Hussein's possession down his spider hole near Tikrit in December 2003.

There is a letter from a US soldier who lost a leg in combat and a flag patch from the only one of 10 soldiers to survive an ambush in Afghanistan. Also present is the note from Condoleezza Rice in June 2004 saying "Mr President, Iraq is sovereign". Bush has scrawled over it, again in Sharpie, "Let FreeDom Reign".

The tone of all this outpouring of Bush material is, if not apologetic, then at least conscious of his critics. The heart of the Bush Center will be the "Decision Theatre" where visitors will be presented with issues – Afghanistan, Iraq, Katrina, the 2008 bailouts – and invited to cast their vote. It is almost as if Bush were saying: "It's all very well to carp, but if you were me, what would you have done?"

The publicity for the book takes the same line, promising: "President Bush writes honestly and directly about his flaws and mistakes, as well as his accomplishments."

A degree of recognition of weakness is perhaps just as well on Bush's part, in that he was undoubtedly a singularly divisive president who infuriated many, not least among his own conservative rank and file. Indeed, the explosion of Tea Party activity that has gripped America over the past 18 months could be seen as Bush's greatest legacy, albeit not one that he had intended.

At a Tea Party rally just outside Dallas on Monday, rightwing Republicans expressed strikingly mixed emotions. Many praised his patriotism. "He loves America," said Monteen Mulcahy; "He showed terrific character and integrity after 9/11," said Cathy Kriske.

But many more conveyed anger about his economic policies of high spending and big government, and several questioned whether he was a conservative at all. "I am a conservative, he is not," said a semi-retired marketing rep, Dennis Thrush. "He called himself a 'compassionate conservative' but I couldn't see the conservative bit."

Tea Partiers pointed to Bush's extension of Medicare drugs for older people, the bank bailouts and his stimulus package at the start of the economic meltdown as examples of his lack of fiscal conservatism. "Bush estranged several elements," said Bruce Buchanan, a professor of politics at the University of Texas. "He alienated strict fiscal conservatives

and several Republicans with his moderate stance on social issues."

Michael Tanner, of the Cato Institute thinktank, said the realignment of the right was partly a counter-reaction to Bush. "The Tea Party movement is the revenge of the economic conservatives who want to cut down government. Bush believed that government had its uses, and that's why many economic conservatives can't stand him."

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## Digital dilemma

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When the George W Bush presidential library opens in early 2013, it will become the 13th addition to a set of records that begins with Herbert Hoover. But though it falls into that tradition, it will also mark something new: the advent of the digital age.

Experts from the National Archive, which has responsibility for all presidential libraries, are wondering what to do with the mountain of emails and Word documents that were spewed out of the Bush White House during his eight years in office.

While his predecessor Bill Clinton produced a modest four terabytes (4m MB) of digital information, the Bush years generated 80 terabytes, including 200m emails.

The challenge for archivists is how to marshal such a vast digital store in a way that makes it meaningful, useable and in compliance with the various data protection acts.

A first step has been to develop, with the help of technology firm Lockheed Martin, an electronic system that will allow preservation of the documents in readable form long into the future, no matter how many new generations of software are introduced in the years ahead.

Then they have to find a way of redacting emails to withhold the names of individuals and covert operations to avoid falling foul of national security, privacy or other requirements. Finally, the hard work begins with sifting through the material and selecting priority areas for digital publication.

A team of 17 archivists is already dedicated to the task, focusing initially on key areas of the Bush administration such as the "war on terror", and education.

"That's when it gets interesting," says Alan Lowe, the library's director. "Intellectually, how do you get your head around such a mammoth digital collection?"

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