



Bush's Third Term

By: JEREMY LOTT - November 5th, 2012

An argument about the Obama first term presidential analyst Gene Healy has made almost inadvertently.

Candidate Barack Obama presented himself as an agent of hope and change, a dramatic break with the failed policies and cynical politics of a tired, retiring president. That is not, to put it mildly, how things have panned out. Once electoral fervor dies down, scholars will surely notice something rather awkward: from a distance, the first term of the Obama administration looks a whole lot like a third term for George W. Bush.

The best case for this is made almost accidentally by my former colleague, Cato Institute vice president Gene Healy, in the new e-book *False Idol: Barack Obama and the Cult of the Presidency*. Healy's beef is not so much with Barack Obama as with the presidency itself, in his telling an impossibly large institution that cannot deliver all the things Americans expect of it. "The arc of the presidency bends toward failure," Healy warns.

That arc bends in certain predictable ways. Americans, Healy explains, "demand that the president provide seamless protection from natural disasters, economic dislocation, and terrorist strikes." The president, being a smart politician, seeks out "powers to match those daunting responsibilities." He gets those enhanced powers but still disappoints because "no earthly power could possibly suffice to deliver the miracles we crave."

That's the larger story Healy tells with his slight Jersey accent. For what it's worth, I agree with the main of his argument. But along the way, he wrote another book that I had been dearly hoping somebody would give us. This much more useful book pushes past the partisan squid ink to give us a detailed look at the great continuity between the Bush and Obama administrations.

For Democrats in particular, this ought to smart. Presidents Bush and Obama both expanded the government's reach into medicine -- through Medicare Part D and Obamacare. Both worked to bail out the banks and the auto industry. Both stumped for stimulus spending. Both put their signatures on what are still stupidly known as the

Bush tax cuts. Both dramatically boosted overall spending and piled up the deficits, pushing us ever closer to financial ruin.

President Bush got America into two land wars -- one probably unavoidable, the other a highly controversial war of choice. Obama ran against "dumb wars," then doubled down in Afghanistan, tried to keep troops in Iraq, and broke the fragile peace Bush had brokered with Libya without so much as a by-your-leave to Congress.

Bush started detaining prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Obama pledged to shut the prison down, failed spectacularly in the courts and in Congress, and adopted a de facto posture of not taking enemies alive. Saddam Hussein was captured, tried, and duly executed by those people he had kept under heel. Osama bin Laden sleeps with the fishes. The military has scaled back plans for new planes and replaced them with a fleet of shiny unmanned death dealers from above.

Bush vs. Obama. Compassionate conservatism and the war on terror vs. hope, change and killer drones. There are differences, to be sure, but Healy shows that they pale against the similarities. This is a great service to the world of politics, and of letters.