

Bush-bashing: the hated and the haters

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Review essay

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Four years ago, George W. Bush campaigned as the “everyman President” who would “restore” honour and integrity to the White House and promised not to be the “ugly American” abroad. At the time, few could have imagined that approaching the end of his first term as President he would be as hated in America as Richard Nixon once was and more despised and mocked overseas than even Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s. It seems President George Walker Bush has a particular ability to get under the skin, to rile, to infuriate and to dumbfound. Yet he was once the black sheep of the Bush dynasty, with seemingly little prospect of emulating his father’s stellar political career. As Bush himself admitted to a gathering of religious leaders in September 2002: “Right now I should be in a bar in Texas, not in the Oval Office.” At the time he proffered that finding God had made the difference. Since Bush left the bars and parties behind to become a serious player within the Republican Party, it has been his enemies who have experienced one long hangover.

How many ways can I hate thee? Being a born-again Texan conservative whose rhetorical style is seen by many as a combination of moralistic jingoism, cowboy fightin’ words and mangled syntax, Bush evokes longstanding stereotypes of the American philistine and redneck. Add to this claims that his achievements are solely due to his daddy’s friends and connections and the image that comes to mind is of a politician born to rule with a silver foot in his mouth. As if this wasn’t enough to attract the wrath of his opponents, Bush’s disputed election victory, his dismissal of the Kyoto Protocol, his tax cuts overwhelmingly in favour of the rich and his policies in Iraq and Afghanistan have all added fuel to their passionate hatred. Nevertheless these detractors may yet face further disappointment as Bush, with his loyal supporter base and the potential appeal of his message to American voters still has an even chance of winning the 2004 presidential election.

Being strongly disliked domestically or abroad is not necessarily a hindrance to political success, but a sign of it, as Bill Clinton discovered. Hatred and popularity can be two sides of the same political coin. When the former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar told Bush that in Europe he was “nearly as unpopular as Ronald Reagan”, Bush replied, “I’m keeping pretty good company.” Being hated is part of being a political leader. How these negative images emerge and are reinforced has much to do with the images and sound bites fed to us. Furthermore, as the media careers of some of the greatest haters of the last hundred years remind us, there is a fine line between visionary fear and paranoid loathing.

Having a political figure to gnaw away at has been the basis of many a journalist’s career. However, as the obsession grows, sometimes the watchdog turns rabid and needs to be put down or pulled to a new brief. One such scribe, Christopher Hitchens, who accused Bill Clinton of most crimes and misdemeanours under the sun – most brilliantly in his 1996 piece “Hard dog to keep on the porch” – was told by *Vanity Fair* in the latter years of the Clinton presidency, “No more columns on Clinton”. From *Salon.com* to the *London Review of Books*, the prolific Hitchens railed against Clinton for betraying the idealism of the 1960s for vacuous and self-serving ends. For Hitchens, Clinton was the ultimate baby boomer sell-out. Not satisfied with newspaper and magazine denunciations, Hitchens seared into print with a hatchet book, *No one left to lie to* (Verso, 1999), which documented the president’s supposed lies and hypocrisy.

Clinton-hating was such a broad phenomenon in the 1990s that James Stewart aptly dubbed it a “blood sport”. While Hitchens largely attacked Clinton from the moralistic left flank, most of Clinton’s sworn enemies attacked from the right. Conservative journalists such as David Brock, R. Emmett Tyrrell jnr and Ambrose Evans-Pritchard made a name for themselves by recycling every Arkansas rumour about Clinton from his supposed connections to drug-smuggling Contra rebels from Nicaragua, to claims that he had had sex with anything that moved in “The Natural State” – as Arkansas is known. Such journalism brought trash magazine exposés to the broadsheets and cheapened the quality of modern reporting, a fact Brock later acknowledged in his memoir *Blinded by the Right* (Three Rivers Press, 2003) in which he tells the story of how he turned his back on the Clinton-haters. However, at a time when political journalism was struggling to hold its place in modern media, the Clinton scandals received plenty of attention and sold copy.

No discussion of journalistic invective should omit the name of H.L. Mencken, an early 20th-century journalist of famed wit and sarcastic tone. Mencken slated many a politician, but few more savagely than William Jennings Bryan. In his obituary of Bryan one gets a sense of his feelings: “He [Bryan] was, in fact, a charlatan, a mountebank, a zany without any shame or dignity. What animated him from end to end of his grotesque career was simply ambition – the ambition of a common man to get his hand upon the collar of his superiors, or, failing that, to get his thumb into their eyes. He was born with a roaring voice, and it had the trick of inflaming halfwits against their betters, that he himself might shine.” Bryan’s backcountry religious populism disgusted Mencken to his core and readers of his columns were left in no doubt about his hatred of Bryan.

Bryan’s puff and fury, displayed famously in his role in the Scopes Monkey Trial, made him a figure easily derided; however, he is far from alone in having an acid pen turned against him. Another spite-filled journalist from the early 20th century, J. Westbrook Pegler, took regular aim at the ultra-popular Roosevelts. Although originally a supporter, Pegler turned against the Roosevelts in his syndicated column “Fair Enough”, in which he saw himself as defending the interests of the common man against “pretensions, hypocrisy, and dishonesty” – self-justifications that might be heard from any number of tabloid journalists. Pegler once wrote of Eleanor Roosevelt: “This woman is a political force of enormous ambitions. She is a menace, unscrupulous as the truth, vain, cynical, all with a pretense of exaggerated kindness and human feeling which deceives millions of gullible persons.” Asked once about this attack on her character, Mrs Roosevelt replied: “It seems to me a little exaggerated, let us say. No one could be quite as bad as all that.” Pegler was not alone in singling out Eleanor Roosevelt for criticism, for reasons that some saw as paralleling similar attacks on Hillary Clinton. It has been argued that both were set upon because they broke the traditional First Lady mould with their up-front confidence and their active involvement in public policy debates.

Hillary-hating, particularly before Bill admitted he did have some sort of “inappropriate” relations with “that woman”, had a broader base than anti-Eleanor opinion. The graceful Henry Louis Gates jnr suggested in early 1996 that “like horseracing, Hillary-hating has become one of those national pastimes which unites the elite and lumpen”. Many journalists have taken aim at Hillary, notably a line-up of conservative women who include authors Barbara Olsen and Ann Coulter. However, the attack possibly most remembered was delivered by *New York Times* columnist William Safire who pronounced Ms Clinton a “congenital liar”. When asked to explain the level of animosity towards her, not without perception, Ms Clinton proffered: “I apparently remind some people of their mother-in-law or their boss, or something.” Since becoming an elected politician Hillary has been successful at softening her image and has slipped down the list of America’s most hated.

Possibly the only other journalist to deserve a place alongside Mencken in the invective sweepstakes is the brilliantly madcap Hunter S. Thompson. Mencken's poison pen railed against Bryan while Thompson's predator of choice was Richard Nixon. Reading Thompson's depictions of Nixon in the *Great Shark Hunt* (Picador, 1980) and in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (Warner Books, 1973) is a treat. In 1968 Thompson poured out these misgivings about Richard Milhous Nixon:

For years I've regarded his very existence as a monument to all the rancid genes and broken chromosomes that corrupt the possibilities of the American Dream; he was a foul caricature of himself, a man with no soul, no inner convictions, with the integrity of a hyena and the style of a poison toad. The Nixon I remembered was utterly humourless; I couldn't imagine him laughing at anything except maybe a paraplegic who wanted to vote Democratic but couldn't quite reach the lever on the voting machine.

Fuelled by alcohol and drugs, Thompson's writings have a ranting quality to them; the quality of a spiralling and enthusiastic pub yarn, exaggerated, of course, but gripping nonetheless. His work from the 1960s and 1970s spins a beautiful web of sentences and images and is often driven by an idealism about what America could be, as the above quote suggests. However, by the 1980s, when *Generation of Swine* (Picador, 1988) appeared, Hunter's work had become addled and paranoid rather than perceptive. Nevertheless, at times he still hit the nail on the head as with his early warning that Clinton was a snake that people would be tricked into trusting and picking up, only to be bitten.

George W. Bush has had a number of his own fourth-estate pursuers from the strange late J.H. Hatfield, who claimed young Bush was a cokehead only to have St Martin's Press pulp his biography on Bush, to the Texan muckraker Molly Ivins who is perhaps the best of the anti-Bush band. The commentator who has outsold all others with Bush-bashing manifestos is Michael Moore. Although Moore is not without talent, particularly as a documentary-maker, his books are simple pamphlets written rather like self-help books with lists and bold print aplenty. His recent *Dude, Where's My Country?* (Penguin, 2003) is a dummies' guide to Dubya with its list of the 10 top whoppers the Bush Administration has told and tips on how to talk to your conservative brother-in-law. Compared with Thompson on Nixon, Moore's humour is pedestrian, with his writing increasingly aimed at the *Dude, Where's My Car?* movie crowd; a crowd one imagines as being rather less literate and edgy than Thompson's audience.

What burns these diehard critics most fiercely are the lies and trickery of their political foes. The title of a recent book on American politics, *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them* by Al Franken (Plume, 2003), sums up the contempt many commentators feel for politicians. Notably, antagonism towards George W. Bush has risen at a time when every second book about him has lies in the title and catalogues the claimed fibs he has largely got away with telling. One of Bush's pursuers, David Corn, recently wrote: "George W. Bush is a liar. He has lied large and small. He has misled. He has broken promises, been unfaithful to political vows ... he has mugged the truth ... This insult is supported by an all too extensive record of self-serving falsifications. So constant is his fibbing that a history of his lies offers a close approximation of the history of his presidential tenure." Get it, the President cannot be trusted. Furthermore, as Corn reminds us, he is also a hypocrite: this was the Bush who campaigned to end the Washington "weasel-words culture" of Clinton and Gore.

According to their detractors, politicians' lies and hypocrisy accord them significant advantages and enable them to deceive the masses. This brings us to the other key feature of

political hatred that feeds the rage of the haters – the inability of others to see the lies that the haters see, which in their view warrant the political shyster being sent permanently packing back to suburban Sydney or the ranch in Crawford, Texas. However, as it plays out, personal attacks on political leaders often have mixed outcomes. They may enhance the polarisation of opinion, as was the case with Paul Keating, or conversely, they may lead to a backlash against the mudslingers, as happened with Bill Clinton. Further, as Richard Nixon liked to remind journalists and protesters, it is the “silent majority” that decides the fate of elected politicians at the ballot box, not the noisy few. Elections might be retold as morality plays but they are ultimately numbers games.

The cartoonist Bill Leak once commented that it is hard to draw Bush because he is already a “caricature”. Seen by many as a verbally challenged, faux-cowboy Texan with born-again Christian beliefs and a bellicose and simplistic foreign policy, Bush is a wellspring of negative stereotypes. In frame one he is Ronald Reagan the B-grade cowboy, next he is Bonzo the chimpanzee, next he is the simpleton Alfred E. Newman. Is this stereotyping too easy and in the end too simple? How did this so-called “yokel” defeat the popular incumbent Texan Governor Anne Richards in 1994? Then – with apparently no record to run on, apart from as some critics tell it, corporate back-scratching and excellent personal fitness from spending so much time in the governor’s gym – how did he defeat John McCain, one of the most admired figures in current American politics, in the 2000 primaries and go on to receive more than 50 million votes in the 2000 general election? Surely, luck, money and connections can only take a politician so far.

Nearly four years into his presidency people are still asking: how bright is George W. Bush? Is the president of the most powerful nation in the world really out of his depth and a policy lightweight? What does the evidence tell us? The best accounts of his life and presidency suggest that his election as Governor of Texas and then as US President not only surprised the press but also members of his own family. His own father, when explaining junior’s rise to power, drew this analogy: “You remember when your kid came home with two A’s – and you thought she was going to fail. That’s exactly what it’s like.” For many of Bush’s critics the answer to this surprise is simple: he bought and cheated his way to success. Money and connections have undoubtedly made the difference with Bush; if he had been born the son of Virginia Clinton he would not be President. But such a hypothetical is somewhat beside the point. You are what you is. And therein lies Bush’s particular strength: his marriage of establishment society, with the connections and money that brings, with populist style – a populism that is aided by his malapropisms and simple takes on complex foreign policy issues.

Bush’s populist pull draws crucially on his Texan style. The state of Texas, along with Christianity, is central to his self-image. Once, when asked how he differs from his father, Bush mythologised that whereas his dad went to a private New England school, he went to a public school in Midland, Texas. This is another one of those half-truths that incenses Bush’s enemies; in reality, the majority of Bush’s education was spent following his father’s footsteps through elite New England institutions such as Andover and Yale. This has led some to challenge the authenticity of Bush’s claim that he is “of Texas”, but I would argue that the stamp “made in Texas” best describes Bush’s values and the political culture that shaped him. Michael Lind in his recent biography, *Made in Texas*, (Basic Books, 2003), convincingly describes Bush as a product of the Texan Deep South with its political culture of Protestantism, nativism and crony capitalism.

When I see Bush cowboy-clothed at a press conference on his ranch in Crawford – a white-flight suburb of Waco, Texas – or talking about “riding herd” with the Middle East peace process as he did recently, I find myself reaching for the modern-day revolver – the

television remote control. Undoubtedly the cultural specificity of Bush's domestic appeal does not travel well. His Texan populism makes it hard to imagine him as a successful politician in any other democracy, unlike a political natural like Bill Clinton who could shine elsewhere. Bush breathes new life into the old theory of American exceptionalism; somewhat like Arnold Schwarzenegger, who, when finding out he had been elected governor, exclaimed: "Only in America." Of course it is not just Bush's persona that makes him unpopular abroad; his policies are central to the disdain. This combination of style and actions is toxic with Bush, perhaps the most disliked American president ever outside the US. In the 2004 Pew Global Attitudes survey he was rated unfavourably by 85 per cent of Germans and 67 per cent of Pakistanis (in contrast Osama bin Laden was rated favourably by 65 per cent of Pakistanis).

But what would foreigners know? If we really want an insight into the real Bush, and not the cartoon version, don't we need to turn to a person who has spent hours interviewing the President and his closest officials? The man who owns that mantle is Bob Woodward of Watergate fame and author of the blockbuster books *Bush at War* (Simon & Schuster, 2002) and *Plan of Attack* (Simon & Schuster, 2004). On one level, Woodward's books are fly-on-the-wall accounts of the big moments of the Bush Administration that have the reader eavesdropping on White House discussions about 9/11 and going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. This could seem compelling and the ultimate statement on the Administration. However, the books draw on embellished retrospective accounts and, as such, are gloss jobs. They are not without certain insights; the second book confirms just how on the outer Secretary Colin Powell has been and how limited the policy debates involving Bush about the decision to go to war in Iraq were. For an Australian reader, Woodward's revelation of Bush's 11th hour offer to Blair for Britain to take a pass on sending troops to Iraq for the initial combat phase is fascinating to contemplate given the very awkward position this would have left Howard in. Yet too many of the lines Woodward feeds us from the mouths of insiders seem scripted to make Bush appear better than he really is. Woodward becomes the Administration's mouthpiece, repeating claims such as Vice-President Dick Cheney's assertions that of course Bush is in charge and that the President is the ultimate decision maker; this just seems all too self-conscious on Cheney's part. The crucial question is how well informed on the details is Bush? Much more insightful on such questions is another recent insider account, *The Price of Loyalty* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) by Ron Suskind.

The Price of Loyalty draws on extensive interviews with Bush's former Treasury secretary, Paul O'Neil, who also handed over an extensive range of documentary evidence for the book. The picture of Bush that emerges from this book is far less flattering – he asks few questions, he doesn't read his secretary's briefs and his decision making is highly instinctive and at times manipulated. The story of how Cheney manipulated the debate over the American response to the Kyoto Protocol is an indictment on the policy-making process in the Bush Administration. Not only was the scientific evidence cavalierly disregarded but any semblance of independent analysis of the pros and cons was scuttled. The other interesting insight about Cheney that emerges is his persistent concern about terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction. And as "a thorough reader of intelligence reports", Cheney no doubt had much sway over America's decision to go to war in Iraq, particularly given the President's comparatively weak knowledge base.

On US policy on Israel and Iraq, O'Neil's retelling of events is revealing. In the first cabinet meeting of the new administration, Bush asks if anyone has met Sharon and then tells some of America's brightest minds how he and Sharon shared a helicopter ride over Israel in 1998. Bush explained: "We flew over the Palestinian camps. Looked real bad down there. I don't see much we can do over there at this point. I think it's time to pull out of the

situation.” Powell raises an objection, Bush shrugs and a decision is announced, without any real debate, that the one nation that can get Israel to the negotiating table is pulling out. Bush then turns to National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and asks, “So, Condi, what are we going to talk about today?” To which the answer is, “Iraq ... Mr President.” Thus starts an exchange that O’Neill suggests was scripted. So there we have it, not just a history that is scripted via Woodward, but even scripted exchanges in the one place supposedly safe for political debates – cabinet meetings.

Indictments from near and far, however, may have little impact on the President’s chances of winning re-election. It is too early to say whether his strong support base will be enough to carry the states required to win but all the polling highlights a nation closely divided between the two major parties. Alas, the future of the world could once again hang in the balance of a swinging chad in Florida. Anyone who truly wants to understand their political foes needs to ask, “Why are they popular?” When surveyed, Bush’s supporters regularly comment that they like his “integrity”, “determination” and “decisiveness”. On a policy level, Bush is popular because of his faith, his patriotism and his strong support for traditional values. Just as crucially he speaks to the hip pocket and economic aspirations of many Americans.

During the 2000 election campaign, Al Gore repeatedly criticised Bush for offering tax cuts that Gore claimed would principally benefit the richest 1 per cent of the population. However, those who believe they are part of that elite group are a lot larger than Gore probably realised. A recent study reported that 19 per cent of Americans claim to be part of the richest 1 per cent and a further 20 per cent believe they will enter that 1 per cent in their lifetime. Moreover, these aspirational Americans have high voting rates. So, as they say in America, “You do the math”. Offering tax cuts to the rich was part of a vote-winning strategy, particularly among a population where fewer than 1 per cent support higher taxes to improve public services.

For many foreigners, the Bush Administration confirms their worst apprehensions and prejudices about America, with Bush the incarnation of 200 years of suspicions about Americans as cocksure sanctimonious know-nothings. The Bush Administration’s combination of bellicose policy and incompetent leadership has fundamentally undermined American credibility across the globe. Even the generally mild-mannered *Time* magazine recently described him domestically as the “love him, hate him President” and as the “great divider”.

On one level, American presidents are always likely to disappoint the hopes and needs of the world, especially when compared with celluloid versions like Martin Sheen. And in terms of intelligence and truthfulness, Bush is certainly not alone in being seen as lacking. Even the supremely successful Franklin D. Roosevelt was judged to have a “third-rate mind” by the intellectual class; similarly, the punditry has found few presidents to be particularly honest. However, Bush falls far short of reasonable expectations. Hopefully, enough American voters will recognise this come November. Yet the 2004 election could well be a repeat of 1984 when Ronald Reagan emerged victorious; a victory won despite being deeply disliked internationally and having his many weaknesses exposed by a pack of dogged journalists. One can only imagine what H.L. Mencken would have made of such results; the elitist may well have been tempted to repeat his quip that democracy is “the worship of the jackals by the jackasses”.

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