

FRED BARNES

REBEL
- *in* -
CHIEF

INSIDE THE
BOLD AND
CONTROVERSIAL
PRESIDENCY *of*
GEORGE W. BUSH



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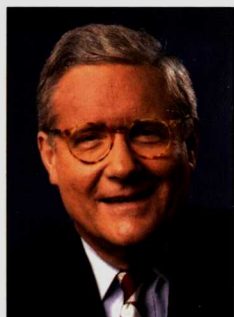
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ISBN 0-307-33649-2



9 780307 336491

52395

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Inside the Bold and Controversial
Presidency of George W. Bush

FRED BARNES



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Published in the United States by Crown Forum, an imprint of the
Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.,
New York.
www.crownpublishing.com

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Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barnes, Fred, 1943–

*Rebel-in-chief : inside the bold and controversial presidency of
George W. Bush* / Fred Barnes.— 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. United States—Politics and government—2001– 2. United
States—Foreign relations—2001– 3. Bush, George W. (George
Walker), 1946—Political and social views. 4. Bush, George W.
(George Walker), 1946—Influence. 5. Conservatism—United
States. I. title.

E902.B3725 2006

973.931'092—dc22

2005023362

ISBN-13: 978-0-307-33649-1

ISBN-10: 0-307-33649-2

Printed in the United States of America

Design by Lenny Henderson

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

To Barbara

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REBEL-*in*-CHIEF

Chapter 1

The Insurgent Leader

IT'S FEBRUARY 2, 2005, and President George W. Bush has a lot on his mind. In a matter of hours he'll deliver the State of the Union address in the chamber of the House of Representatives in the Capitol. The speech will set both the tone and the agenda for his second White House term. And, as always, it will be nationally televised and watched worldwide as well. He's practiced the speech twice before on a TelePrompTer and may once more.

His priorities are bold and controversial. Two weeks ago, in his inaugural address, he announced a crusade to uproot tyranny and plant democracy around the world. Many American and foreign political leaders, plus the usual horde of media commentators, found the idea grandiose or simply naïve. So the president needs to flesh out his ambitious plan convincingly. As luck would have it—and Bush's luck is legendary—his task has been made easier by the breathtaking success of the election in Iraq two days earlier. Before the election, the Washington press corps expected little from the Iraqis. A *Washington Post* reporter, Dana Milbank,

suggested sarcastically that the Iraqi turnout at the polls might number only in the dozens. He was off by 8.5 million.

Bush has other big issues to talk about besides Iraq. He wants to privatize Social Security partially and make the wobbly system solvent for generations to come; he wants to overhaul the tax code; he wants to tilt the ideological balance of the federal courts to the right; and he wants to inject free-market forces into America's dysfunctional health care system.

For now, though, the president has to attend an off-the-record lunch in the White House study adjacent to the State Dining Room. "Why do I have to go to this meeting?" Bush asks his communications director, Dan Bartlett. "It's traditional," Bartlett explains. Indeed, for years, the president has hosted the TV news anchors for lunch on the day of the State of the Union address. It's an invitation the anchors eagerly accept. Peter Jennings and George Stephanopoulos of ABC, Tom Brokaw and Brian Williams of NBC, Chris Wallace and Brit Hume of Fox, and Wolf Blitzer and Judy Woodruff of CNN will be there. So will Dan Rather of CBS, magnanimously invited in spite of having sought to derail the president's reelection campaign by spotlighting four documents (later proved to be fabrications) that indicated Bush had used political pull to get into the Texas Air National Guard and avoid Vietnam duty, and that he had been honorably discharged without fully completing his service. (At the lunch, Rather will suddenly appear solicitous of Bush. "Thank you, Mr. President," he will say as he leaves. "Thank you, Mr. President." Bush will betray no hint of satisfaction.)

Bush's dread of the lunch is understandable. With few

exceptions—Hume is one—the anchors are faithful purveyors of the conventional wisdom, which is usually gloomy regarding outcomes that might cast Bush in a good light. It is also tinged with liberalism, and wrong. The president agrees with practically none of it.

Sure enough, once the lunch meeting begins, the president takes issue with many of the anchors' claims. Stephanopoulos suggests congressional Republicans rightly fear that Social Security reform will hurt them in the 2006 midterm election. "You don't understand the politics of the issue," Bush responds. Woodruff says that critics worry the president is resolved to take on tyrannies everywhere. "I wasn't aware that was a criticism," Bush answers sarcastically. Jennings says an American general in Iraq told him that the Syrians are helpful there. "I'd like to talk to that general," Bush says in disbelief. In fact, the Syrians are nothing but trouble, he adds, and have been all along. Bush chastises his media guests for negativism. "Nobody around this table thought the elections were going to go that well in Afghanistan, Palestine, Ukraine, and Iraq." And they darn well should understand that he intends to dominate Washington and impose his priorities: "If the president doesn't set the agenda," Bush declares firmly, "it'll be set for you."

Bush's conduct at the lunch—edgy, blunt, self-confident, a bit smart-alecky, disdainful of what the media icons are peddling—is typical. In private or public, he is defiant of the press, scornful of the conventional wisdom, and keen to reverse or at least substantially reform long-standing policies like support for undemocratic but friendly autocracies and the no-tinkering approach to Social Security. Stephanopoulos's

notion about potential political harm from seeking to reform Social Security, Bush says, is thirty years behind the times.

Years ago, Donald Rumsfeld answered a reporter's query by saying, "First let me unravel the flaws in your question." Bush has adopted a less bellicose version of the Rumsfeld model. Not surprisingly, he was drawn to Rumsfeld personally. In picking a defense secretary, Bush was initially inclined to go with former senator Dan Coats of Indiana. But he wanted someone who would stand up to Secretary of State Colin Powell and Vice President Dick Cheney in national security deliberations. He turned to a certifiable tough guy—Rumsfeld. Coats became ambassador to Germany.

REBEL

President Bush operates in Washington like the head of a small occupying army of insurgents, an elected band of brothers (and quite a few sisters) on a mission. He's an alien in the realm of the governing class, given a green card by voters. He's a different kind of president in style and substance.

He'd rather invite his first envoy to Iraq, L. Paul Bremer, and his wife, Francie, to a quiet evening at the White House than appear at a Washington gala or social event. The night before the White House Salute to Gospel Music, Bush encountered the Gaither Vocal Band rehearsing in the East Room. He invited them to dinner. Instead of consulting "experts" on Third World development, Bush tapped U2 singer Bono as an adviser and ally on aiding sub-Saharan Africa. He invited Bono, a crusader for debt relief for poor countries,

to two meetings in the Oval Office and rebutted a British reporter's sneering reference to him at a White House press conference in June 2005. "I admire him," the president said. "He is a man of depth and a great heart who cares deeply about the impoverished folks on the continent of Africa." Bono sent Bush a note of thanks for defending him.

Bush is neither an elitist nor a champion of elite opinion. He reflects the political views and cultural tastes of the vast majority of Americans who don't live along the East or West Coast. He's not a sophisticate and doesn't spend his discretionary time with sophisticates. As First Lady Laura Bush once said, she and the president didn't come to Washington to make new friends. And they haven't. They chiefly socialize with old friends, many of them Texans. Bush's view is that he and his aides are in Washington to do a job, then clear out of town. The day after the 2004 election, Bush reelection campaign strategist Matthew Dowd left a sign with the letters "GTT" on his office door. He had "gone to Texas" as quickly as possible to take a teaching post at the University of Texas and work as a political consultant. Bush will follow in 2009.

There are two types of presidents: those who govern and those who lead. A governing president performs all the duties assigned by the Constitution, deals with whatever issues or crises crop up during his term, and does little else. He's a caretaker. Richard Neustadt, in his seminal book *Presidential Power*, characterized such a president as essentially a clerk. Bush's father, George H. W. Bush, was a president who mainly governed. So was Dwight Eisenhower and, for most of his time in the White House, Bill Clinton.

Bush is a president who leads. "If we do not lead, people will suffer," the president told me in an interview I conducted specifically for this book. He controls the national agenda, uses his presidential powers to the fullest and then some, proposes far-reaching policies likely to change the way Americans live, reverses other long-standing policies, and is the foremost leader in world affairs. All the while, he courts controversy, provokes the press, and polarizes the country. The president doesn't worry about running the day-to-day activity of his own government; all he has to manage is the White House staff and individual cabinet secretaries.

His job, he told me, is to "stay out of minutiae, keep the big picture in mind, but also make sure that I know enough about what's going on to get the best information possible." To stress the point, during our interview in the Oval Office Bush called my attention to the rug; he had been surprised, he said, to learn that the first decision a president is expected to make is what color the rug should be. "I wasn't aware that presidents were rug designers," he told me. So he delegated the task—to Laura. Typical of his governing style, though, he gave a clear principle as guidance: he wanted the rug to express the view that an "optimistic person comes here." The rug she designed is sunrise yellow.

An approach like Bush's allows a president to drive policy initiatives, so long as he has a vision of where he wants to take the nation and the world. Bush, despite his wise-guy tendencies and cocky demeanor, is a visionary. So were Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. They, too, were leaders, as controversial and polarizing as Bush.

To the political community—that amalgam of elected

officials, aides, advisers, consultants, lobbyists, bureaucrats, and journalists—Bush is a total surprise as president. In *A Charge to Keep*, his campaign book ghostwritten by adviser Karen Hughes and published in 1999, Bush foreshadowed his governing style and his reliance on his evangelical Christian faith. “I don’t wait well,” Bush said. He saw his job as chief executive as being “to set [the] agenda, to articulate the vision, and to lead.” His interest “is not the means, it is the results.” His faith, Bush said, “frees me. Frees me to make the decisions that others might not like. Frees me to try to do the right thing, even though it may not poll well. Frees me to enjoy life and not worry about what comes next.” Few read the book and fewer still took it seriously. It was dismissed as superficial and self-serving.

Bush himself was seen as an intellectual bantamweight who would have difficulty governing after losing the popular vote to Al Gore in 2000 and winning the White House thanks to a 5–4 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court. He would have to govern as he had as governor of Texas. There, he had collaborated with Democratic lieutenant governor Bob Bullock and a Democratic legislature. In Washington, Democrats wanted Bush to function, in effect, as a national-unity president. Congressional Democrats would be partners in forging policies. It would be a degree of bipartisanship rarely seen in Washington. After all, Bush had said repeatedly in the 2000 campaign that he wanted to restore a tone of civility and cooperation to political relations in Washington. Republicans held only narrow majorities in both houses of Congress. And with a half-dozen moderate Republicans in the Senate always prepared to jump ship, Bush could not count on winning passage of his top priorities or confirmation of his appointees.