BUSH COUNTRY

HOW DUBYA BECAME A GREAT PRESIDENT WHILE DRIVING LIBERALS INSANE

JOHN PODHORETZ

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Also by John Podhoretz

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For Ayala

Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.

—Proverbs 3:17

All rising to a great place is by winding stair.

Francis Bacon

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Energy in the Executive

One might conclude, from his conduct over the past three years, that George W. Bush was put on this earth to do two things:

First, to lead the United States into the third millennium, with all its terrifying challenges and wondrous opportunities.

And second, to drive liberals insane.

He's succeeding brilliantly at both.

In thirty-six months, George W. Bush has led this nation's military into two wars—innovative engagements that will serve as the blueprint for martial conflict for the foreseeable future. In those wars, he ousted two of the world's most barbaric regimes. He has committed the nation to a decades-long confrontation with the perpetrators and funders of international terrorism. He has redirected and reconceived American foreign policy to confront the threat of rogue states possessing weapons of mass destruction. He has sought to extend the democratic freedoms enjoyed by Americans to the Muslim world. He has initiated a

thoroughgoing reconstruction of the structures of both the American military and the executive branch of the government of the United States.

He has forced two massive and controversial tax cuts through a sometimes recalcitrant Congress. Having campaigned for the presidency calling himself a "reformer with results," once in office Bush signed a campaign-finance reform bill and has fought for a measure that would change the way elderly Americans get their health care and pay for prescription drugs. He has imposed a new doctrine of accountability on the American education system. He has committed himself and 15 billion taxpayer dollars to the eradication of AIDS in Africa. He has been forced to wrestle with matters of the most profound philosophical significance in the matter of stem-cell research—and devised a Solomonic solution that frustrated absolutists on both sides of the philosophical divide but that fit the ambiguities of the present moment.

This would be an astonishing list of accomplishments for a president who had served all eight years in office. Bush has done it all in just three.

The best description of Bush's approach to the presidency can be found in a document more than two hundred years old—Federalist Paper Number 70. Its author, Alexander Hamilton, argues that "Energy in the Executive is a leading character in the definition of good government." Hamilton asserts that even in this self-governing nation, the president must act. He must do things, and do them decisively, creatively, and consistently. Energy in the executive, Federalist 70 continues, "is essential to the protection of the community against foreign attacks; it is not less essential to the steady administration of the laws; to the protec-

tion of property against those irregular and high-handed combinations which sometimes interrupt the ordinary course of justice; to the security of liberty against the enterprises and assaults of Ambition, of faction, and of anarchy."

The "energy in the executive" that characterizes Bush's presidency has been directed primarily toward "the protection of the community against foreign attacks." In his speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, Bush promised the American people nothing less than his own blood, sweat, toil, and tears to defeat the foe that had attacked the country on September 11, 2001.

"I will not yield; I will not rest; I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people," he said.

And he meant it.

Never yielding, never resting, and never relenting, Bush would not pursue the Al-Qaeda terror network by indicting its members and attempting to arrest them, as his predecessor, Bill Clinton, chose to do when terrorists first struck the World Trade Center in 1993. Bush believed he had to dig up Al-Qaeda by its roots. To that end, he would declare that the enemy was not only Al-Qaeda itself but the states that support and shield it—and he would commit the American military to oust Al-Qaeda's primary sponsor, the regime run by the Taliban, from Afghanistan, to achieve his goals.

At the same time, Bush was compelled to contemplate the direction terrorism might take in the future. This time the weapon of choice had been the airplane. What might it be next time? The nation got a hint when five people died and eighteen were infected as a result of mysterious envelopes laced with powdered

anthrax. Anthrax was one of the substances that had come to be known collectively as "weapons of mass destruction"—a term that covered the waterfront from biological agents like anthrax to chemical agents like sarin to nuclear bombs.

The need to prevent the use of a weapon of mass destruction by a terrorist group widened the scope of the war on terror. Bush came to focus on so-called rogue states that had aggressively sought and made such weapons and seemed as though they would be nearly without constraint when it might come to passing them along.

He determined it would not be sufficient to fight Al-Qaeda. America had to confront the rogue states as well. And that led directly to Iraq. It was the only one of these countries that had consciously and consistently defied its own legal obligation under the terms that ended the 1991 Persian Gulf War to end any and all efforts to create such weapons. The natural terrorist hunger to acquire WMDs, and Saddam Hussein's desire to humiliate the United States, combined to make Iraq a new kind of threat to America and to the world.

The new threat required nothing less than a new doctrine, a subject Bush began to explore in a speech at West Point in June 2002. "Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend," the president said. "Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies. . . . If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long."

The war Bush waged against the regime of Saddam Hussein beginning in March 2003 was therefore an integral part of his

war on terrorism. That is why Bush called it "the battle of Iraq" in his May 2003 speech announcing the end of major combat operations there. It is why Bush went before the nation on September 7, 2003, and declared that the ongoing effort to pacify Iraq had become "the central front" of the war on terror.

Bush's capacity to think about the most horrific threats and act decisively to prevent them from happening are both marks of the high seriousness with which he takes his constitutional responsibilities. They also speak to another "energy in the executive" quality that did not appear to be a hallmark of his character before he assumed the presidency: his daring.

As a presidential candidate, Bush had been quite cautious, staking out his positions on a few important matters, hammering them home again and again, never trying to get too far out in front on any issue.

He has conducted his presidency in a radically different manner. Bush will begin a public discussion by taking a breathtakingly ambitious posture—one far more ambitious than anybody, friend or foe, expected him to take. The most notable example of this was his announcement that we would make no distinction between the terrorists who attacked us on September 11 "and those who harbor them." This immediately broadened and widened the war in a way that it is impossible to believe his predecessor would have done had Clinton been in office on 9/11. With those five words, Bush changed the nature of the worldwide discussion of terrorism forever.

He has been as bold in pursuing certain domestic-policy matters. Twice he has presented Congress with tax-cut packages vastly larger than Congress anticipated. He did not attempt to make the package politically palatable to his adversaries before introducing

it. He said, in effect, *This is what I think the economy needs. Take it or leave it.* In the end, in both cases, Bush did compromise, but not before the Hobson's choice he had placed before the House and Senate forced the fence-sitters to jump off the fence and grudgingly follow him.

The "energy in the executive" Bush displays in advancing his own policy is creative, tactical, and strategic. He uses it to move his agenda forward. That's the creative part. By constantly being on the move, he forces his opponents into a reactive, defensive stance. That's the tactical part. And the discussion usually takes place on Bush's terms and in a frame of reference Bush has chosen for it. That's the strategic part.

His presidential style is almost completely the reverse of Clinton's. The forty-second president of the United States was daring in the way he pursued his personal hungers. But whenever Clinton tried to be bold in matters of policy—such as the mammoth health-care plan designed by his wife, Hillary—the results were usually disastrous. The cautious, careful, even timid Clinton was the victorious Clinton. He closely followed public-opinion polls and tailored his policies to suit the public mood.

By contrast, George W. Bush has remarkable self-discipline in his personal life. To a man, his close aides describe him as the most disciplined person they've ever known. When it comes to matters of policy, however, Bush has the instincts of a successful riverboat gambler. Not the kind of gambler who is so addicted to the thrill of the easy win that he inevitably loses everything, but rather the poker player who wins most of the time by exerting the kind of self-control that a compulsive gambler cannot.

The successful poker player chooses the hands he plays. Over the course of a long game, he will make it clear to other players that he's not a bluffer. He plays when he has the cards, and they

had best understand this if they don't want to lose their shirts. But as the game progresses, he quietly and deliberately uses the authority he has established. Only after he has won for real, and stayed away from losing hands, does he begin to venture into the rarefied territory that separates the truly great poker players from others: the successful bluff.

Bush showed his stuff in 2002 when it came to standing firm against Iraq. He played both the United States Congress and the United Nations Security Council with the skill of the Cincinnati Kid.

In the case of the United States Congress, the administration let it be known that its lawyers believed the president could initiate military action against Iraq without a congressional war authorization. That idea caused a firestorm in Washington, as Democrat after Democrat screamed in outrage. How could the president possibly consider going to war with Iraq absent a congressional resolution? They sputtered and hollered and fumed, whereupon the administration said: *Fine. You insist on a congressional war resolution? We'll take it.* They had little choice but to give it to him.

The gambler president found himself in a similar but far more difficult game with the United Nations Security Council. In September 2002, he laid out the case before the United Nations for forcibly disarming Iraq. His speech before the General Assembly posed a stark choice to the world body: "Will the United Nations serve the purpose of its founding, or will it be irrelevant?" The president got his way in part when the Security Council passed Resolution 1441 in November 2002, which declared Iraq in "material breach" of United Nations resolutions and warned Iraq of "serious consequences" if it continued to defy them. "Serious consequences" was a euphemism for war.