

INTRODUCTION

The Ambitions of the George W. Bush Presidency

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The peculiar circumstances surrounding the election of George W. Bush to the presidency in no way prepared Americans for the remarkable twists and turns of policy and politics that characterized his eight years in office. Elected with no public mandate whatever, Bush achieved surprising legislative success in his early months in the White House, winning passage of his two top priorities. These were a major tax cut—\$1.35 trillion over ten years—and reform of education policy involving a new system of standardized testing of elementary and secondary school students (Barshay 2001). His public support remained reasonably strong during this period, given that he had won only a minority of the popular vote. The defection of Senator James Jeffords of Vermont to the Democratic caucus in mid-2001, however, gave Democrats control of the Senate and heightened the intensity of partisan conflict in Washington.

Then came 9/11—the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, that refocused his presidency on national security concerns and drove his public support to unprecedented heights. The political opportunity granted by strong public popularity revealed the grand ambitions underlying the Bush presidency. Bush gained a rare supremacy over national security

policy. Congress granted him war powers authority to initiate conflict with rogue regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, granted the administration extensive authority over domestic surveillance in the USA-PATRIOT Act, and acquiesced to the administration's requests for additional military spending. Recurring partisan divisions in Congress in 2002 caused Bush gradually to adopt a more partisan approach in seeking congressional support. The president also took the unusual political risk of deploying his personal popularity in the 2002 elections, with considerable success. The Republican ascendancy in the Senate (a two-seat gain) and gains in the House (six seats) constituted the first such gain for a president in his first midterm since the Roosevelt New Deal sweep of 1934. The Bush administration then scored an important congressional victory in mid-2003 with passage of a bill cutting taxes \$326 billion through 2013, aimed at spurring the flagging economy (Ota 2003). Although \$326 billion was less than half the size of the tax cut originally proposed by his administration, Bush claimed a policy victory. Congress also considered another administration priority: an ambitious plan for prescription drug coverage for Medicare recipients costing an estimated \$400 billion over ten years (Toner and Pear 2003). Perhaps the greatest risk of his presidency, the war with Iraq, produced a swift military victory but also spawned much international opposition and a troublesome and politically costly regime of military occupation.

As the Iraq occupation that began in 2003 dragged on into 2004, Bush scored a narrow reelection victory over Democratic nominee John Kerry, a senator from Massachusetts, drawing crucial support from voters concerned about national security (Taylor 2004). Republicans also picked up four Senate and three House seats, padding their slim majorities in Congress. The year 2005, however, proved to be another great turning point in the Bush presidency. As conditions deteriorated during the lengthy Iraq occupation and no weapons of mass destruction—a vital argument for the war—were found, public support for Bush and the GOP steadily eroded. Bush compounded his problems in 2005 by launching a futile campaign to fundamentally restructure Social Security, the largest and probably most popular domestic program of the national government. In August of that year, the sluggish governmental response to Hurricane Katrina's devastation further punctured the president's popularity. By 2006, a string of scandals involving the congressional GOP, combined with continuing bad news from Iraq, led to a Democratic takeover of both chambers of Congress.

The final years of Bush's presidency involved more of the same bad news for the president. Progress in Iraq slowly appeared after Bush fired Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and replaced him with Robert Gates. In late 2007, Bush announced a change in Iraq strategy, which involved sending a surge of additional troops into the country. This approach, advocated by the new general in charge of Iraq operations, David Petraeus, did lead to a substantial reduction in American and Iraqi casualties, which permitted some steps toward political reconciliation in that battered nation. Public opinion, however, was slow to warm to the new approach, and by early 2008, a majority of Americans were telling Gallup pollsters they preferred military withdrawal either immediately or on a fixed timetable (Gallup 2008a). An unsteady economy, caused by excesses in the housing and lending sectors of the economy and rising oil prices, led to public pessimism about Bush's stewardship. Bush was able to withstand policy challenges by the Democratic Congress in 2007 and 2008 on Iraq war funding and federal spending. By the final year of his second term, though, Republicans were unpopular as a party and the GOP had dim prospects in the 2008 elections. Barack Obama's solid win in the presidential race coupled with Democratic gains in House and Senate contests delivered a final repudiation to Bush and his party.

The Grand Task of Regime Restoration

How do we make sense of these zigs and zags? Presidential scholar Stephen Skowronek provides several concepts that help us to understand the project at the heart of the Bush presidency. To Skowronek, the presidency is an inherently "disruptive" institution, a sort of "battering ram" used by presidents to alter the actions and results issuing from permanent Washington, that thick encrustation of interest groups, legislative specialists in Congress, and careerist federal bureaucrats. Permanent Washington has evolved through "secular time," which Skowronek defines as the historical medium through which power structures grow and change (Skowronek 1997, 30). The rise of lasting power relationships beyond direct presidential control proceeded apace throughout the twentieth century. This "institutional thickening" involved an "ever thicker" set of governmental and political arrangements in Washington that produce greater "institutional resilience" to attempts by presidents to alter established arrangements (Skowronek 1997, 413).

A new president seeks to create an alternative conception of government. Instead of merely acceding to the power patterns that develop in

secular time, presidents seek to rework those patterns to further their own purposes, as Nicol C. Rae notes in his chapter placing George W. Bush's presidency in historical context. In Skowronek's terms, presidents seek to create an alternative form of governmental operation by invoking "political time," the historical medium through which authority structures have recurred (Skowronek 1997, 30). That is, presidents frequently try to create political regimes supported by constitutional authority and popular approval. A successful political regime can order events according to its own schedule, displacing the ability of permanent Washington to order events through its residues of power. It is a battle between presidential authority and other traditional sources of power in Washington.

What constitutes a successful presidential "regime"? Robert C. Lieberman defines their various aspects: "Regimes appear at a variety of levels, from formal institutions (such as the structure of Congress and the administrative state) to the social bases of politics (such as party alignments and coalitions and patterns of interest representation); from ideas (such as prevailing beliefs about the proper role of government) to informal norms (such as patterns of Congressional behavior). Nested within these broadly defined institutional arrangements are commitments to particular policies that become the touchstone for political action and conflict for leaders and would-be leaders over the course of a generation or more" (Lieberman 2000, 275). From this definition, it is not difficult to outline the regime the Bush administration sought to entrench. Institutionally, the Bush administration sought control of Congress by reliable, partisan Republican majorities and enhanced presidential control over the executive branch through reorganizations spawned by national security concerns, such as the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. Politically, the administration pursued consistent Republican electoral majorities. The primary tactical imperative in this was maintaining high support among the party's core of activists through strong national security policies and tax cuts. James L. Guth notes in his chapter how Bush also cultivated Christian conservatives within his coalition with careful emphasis on particular social policies. A second primary tactic was the wooing of key elements of the electorate—suburbanites, rural residents, white Catholics, Latinos, working-class males—through artful public statements and emphasis on issues of particular interest to them (accountability reforms in education, farm price supports, stem-cell research, judicial appointments, steel tariffs) (Brownstein 2002, 2). Key ideas of the regime included a recurrent emphasis on tax cuts as the preferred engine of economic management

and an aggressive new foreign policy involving military preemption of potential terror threats and distrust of recent international agreements such as those on global warming and the International Criminal Court. Informal norms included a personal distancing of the president from micropolitical dealing and renewed emphasis on partisan unity in Congress.

What lay behind all of these efforts? The primary project of the Bush presidency was the completion of the political reconstruction of national politics, government, and policy begun by Ronald Reagan in 1981. Examine the features of the second Bush regime, and you will find commitments, policies, and tactics consistent with those of Reagan and having as their ultimate end the lasting triumph of Reaganite rule in national government: military strength, tax cuts, enhanced executive power at the expense of Congress, and a stable electoral majority that prefers conservative Republicans. George W. Bush was centrally engaged in a project of political restoration through tactically innovative means.

Skowronek identifies such presidents as “orthodox innovators” who seek to “articulate” the commitments of a previous regime: “to fit the existing parts of the regime together in a new and more relevant way . . . they galvanize political action with promises to continue the good work of the past and demonstrate the vitality of the established order to changing times” (Skowronek 1997, 41). How did Bush seek to make the Reagan regime relevant to the early twenty-first century? He resurrected unsuccessful initiatives of recent GOP presidents, such as the privatization of Social Security, a missile defense system, educational vouchers, and less invasive environmental regulation. Bush employed the Reagan administration’s concept of the “unitary executive,” explained in Peri E. Arnold’s chapter, in order to harness presidential power for his regime mission. His judicial appointments, analyzed by Nancy Maveety in this volume, sought to continue the approach to constitutional interpretation practiced by Reagan appointees. Bush varied from the Reagan policy agenda, however, by pursuing “magnet” issues that might broaden the regime’s coalition of supporters through measures such as education reform and prescription drug coverage for Medicare recipients.

Bush also went beyond the previous regime in pursuing some of its original commitments. One example, assessed in detail herein by John Frendeis and Raymond Tatalovich, involves the supply-side economics of tax cutting. Ronald Reagan and his vice president and successor, George Herbert Walker Bush, both signed tax increases (in 1982 and 1990) in the wake of budget deficits. As deficits grew in 2003, George W. Bush instead

proposed large tax cuts totaling \$726 billion through 2013, much to the delight of his coalition's antitax advocates, like Grover Norquist, head of Americans for Tax Reform. Another example is Iraq policy. The elder Bush tried to contain Iraq and hoped for a coup in the wake of the Gulf War in 1990–1991. George W. Bush followed a more aggressive approach of “regime change” and invaded the country. More broadly, as James M. McCormick notes in his chapter, Bush's foreign policy doctrine of military “preemption” with regard to international terror threats codifies in doctrine the earlier regime's pattern of situational uses of force overseas against perceived national security threats from Libya, Grenada, and Panama. Bush's national security policies adopted in the face of international terrorist threats, Stanley A. Renshon notes in his chapter, may be Bush's most enduring legacy.

In his mission of regime articulation, Bush resembled previous orthodox innovators of American political history. These presidents' innovations often involved aggressive foreign policies, given the constraints on domestic policy innovation presented by the established regimes with which they were affiliated. Democrat James K. Polk, a loyal Jacksonian Democrat nicknamed “Young Hickory,” led the nation through a war with Mexico. William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, operating within the long-established Republican political regime of the era, greatly expanded America's diplomatic and military role in the world. Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson, heirs of FDR's New Deal regime, committed American troops to long conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. George W. Bush, loyal to the commitments of the earlier Reagan-Bush regime, prosecuted international war on terror and invaded Iraq.

High Risk

The presidencies of many orthodox innovators came to a bad end because their innovations spawned dissension within the established political regimes with which they were affiliated. Polk's expansionist policies sparked controversies over the extension of slavery; he could not quell those controversies, and they ultimately destroyed the Jacksonian regime. Theodore Roosevelt's domestic progressivism caused a split in his party that led to the election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson in 1912. The interminable Korean War caused Truman to leave the White House as a highly unpopular president, succeeded by Republican Dwight Eisenhower. Johnson's disastrous Vietnam policy deeply split his party and helped elect Republican Richard Nixon president in 1968. All three recent presidents—Tru-

man, Johnson, and Bush—ended their presidencies with low popularity and depleted ranks of fellow partisans in Congress. David Mayhew notes that a war can bring electoral contests about whether it “should have been fought in the first place” and over the possibility of “incompetent management” (Mayhew 2005, 480). Both types of debate occurred in 2006 and 2008, to the disadvantage of Bush and the GOP.

The chief political strategist of the Bush White House, Karl Rove, looked for lessons in the presidency of William McKinley, the only orthodox innovator who presided over a major and lasting popular electoral realignment (Dubose, Reid, and Cannon 2003, 169; Dionne 2001, 1). John J. Coleman and Kevin S. Price note in their chapter how the Bush administration pursued partisan realignment as a governing strategy, hence McKinley’s relevance for Rove. McKinley’s term included a muscular new foreign policy and a popular foreign war (the Spanish-American War in 1898), as well as a domestic strategy that won additional working-class voters for Republicans through the promise of burgeoning industrial capitalism—the appeal of the “full dinner pail.” Democrats veered from the mainstream by nominating the strident populist William Jennings Bryan, who ran against McKinley in both 1896 and 1900. The Bush White House hoped the Democrats would similarly vacate the center in 2004. Their dreams were realized by the nomination of a strong liberal, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts. Even given that advantage, Bush won only a narrow reelection victory.

Bush’s narrow margin underscored the great obstacles his administration faced in its attempt to entrench the Reagan regime. First, as Skowronek notes, the political reconstruction attempted by Ronald Reagan was far from complete. He describes it as largely “rhetorical rather than institutional” (Skowronek 1997, 32) because “institutional thickening” in national government had become steadily more prevalent over time (Skowronek 1997, 422). The firm relationships between a Democratic Congress, sympathetic interest groups, and career bureaucrats made domestic policy innovation difficult for Reagan after his initial success in cutting spending and taxes in 1981. These constraints encumbered his successor, George H. W. Bush, even more, leading him to raise taxes in a 1990 budget deal with the Democratic Congress, which splintered support among his conservative regime followers and contributed to his defeat in 1992. The Reaganite regime did reappear in the Republican sweep of Congress in 1994, led by the outspoken conservative Newt Gingrich (R-Georgia), who became House Speaker. But the Republican Congress had at best mixed

results in dueling with Democratic president Bill Clinton. From 1993 to 2000, elements of the Reagan regime contested but in no sense dominated national policymaking and political appointments.

George W. Bush's accession to the White House, despite his losing the popular vote, and Republican losses of House and Senate seats revealed that the electoral coalition supporting a conservative policy regime had a far from secure grip on power. Bush nevertheless proved remarkably adept in winning congressional approval of his top agenda items in 2001. One, the large tax cut, served to consolidate his base, while the other, a reform of education policy passed with the support of leading Democrats, including Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Massachusetts), served to broaden his appeal among suburbanite voters not reliably part of his electoral coalition (Ornstein 2001). Bush's early success despite his controversial election victory lends support to Richard Pious's contention that adept use of the presidency's constitutional prerogatives is more central than short-term political factors "in determining what a president can accomplish" (Pious 1979, 16).

Ironically, 9/11 greatly boosted Bush's personal popularity and, for a time, public support for his party. However, by 2002, the president faced a highly competitive midterm election. The savvy political tactics of regime leaders in the White House and national Republican Party leadership, coupled with the president's risky decision to deploy his personal popularity on behalf of key Senate candidates, produced small but historically remarkable gains for Republicans. Republicans achieved narrow majorities in the House and Senate, but a close partisan division remained among the public. Superior GOP get-out-the-vote efforts in 2004 created an electorate with equal numbers of Republican and Democratic identifiers—37 percent (Barone and Cohen 2005, 25). But adverse events turned independents away from the GOP, and by 2006, there was a decline in Republican identification (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2007, 280). By 2008, Democrats enjoyed a 10- to 15-point lead in party identification in national polls (Pew Research Center poll 2008) that propelled them to solid victories in the presidential and congressional contests.

By the end of the Bush presidency, Republicans had failed to solidify a majority of voters around a conservative political regime. The GOP did make gains among rural voters, but they are a declining part of the electorate. It is true, as Coleman and Price note in their chapter here, that the fastest-growing counties in America voted increasingly Republican in 2000 (Barone 2001, 31). Yet, in the elections of 1992, 1996, and 2000, Dem-

ocrats did quite well among female and professional voters. They maintain a huge advantage among African Americans. Latinos, the sleeping giant of American politics, also continue to favor Democrats by a substantial margin. Analysts John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira find an emerging Democratic electoral majority in these trends that “reflects deep-seated social and economic trends that are changing the face of the country. . . . Today’s Democrats are the party of the transition from urban industrialism to a new postindustrial metropolitan order in which men and women play equal roles and in which white America is supplanted by multiracial, multiethnic America” (Judis and Teixeira 2002, 6). The 2006 and 2008 elections lent credence to their analysis.

Bush’s task, unlike that of previous orthodox innovators, involved the unprecedented challenge of finally installing a successful political regime, rather than merely maintaining its current dominance, which was the mission of Presidents Polk, McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Truman, and Johnson. It is harder to complete a major regime transition than to maintain one that has already transpired. The “indeterminate” regime situation in which Bush found himself was very evident in Washington politics during a time of “institutional thickening.” Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter describe it as “institutional combat” in which national politicians use weapons of institutional power to fight over governmental direction (Ginsberg and Shefter 2002, 21). Elections are less conclusive, often resulting in narrow margins of control for the winning national party. Given the absence of an entrenched political regime, incentives for obstruction grow among leaders of both parties.

The frequently even partisan balance in government sharpens motivations to use institutional authority to disrupt opponents. Congress in recent years witnessed an abundance of such behavior. During the Bush presidency, party government has prevailed in the House during periods of both Republican and Democratic control. The Speaker and Rules Committee together structure the floor agenda to limit the potential of the minority party to prevail via amendments or procedural obstructions. This strategy facilitated Bush’s agenda until 2007, when Democrats stifled it. A prime weapon of institutional combat during the Bush presidency was the Senate filibuster. Ironically, Republicans were the first to employ it effectively—against Bill Clinton’s 1993 budget plan. From 2001 to 2006, Senate Democrats prevented several judicial nominations via filibuster. Republicans returned the favor in 2007 and 2008 by derailing Democratic legislation to curtail America’s involvement in Iraq.

Hence the high risks for the Bush administration: it sought to entrench a conservative regime among a public beset by even partisan divisions and without a stable Washington governing coalition. Journalist John Harwood aptly termed the Bush incumbency a “low margin, party-line presidency” (Harwood 2003, 1). The Bush administration had limited room for maneuver, despite the windfall of public support after 9/11. George W. Bush played this national security “trump card” for maximum political effect from 2001 to 2003, but in terms of electoral and institutional politics, he faced considerable challenges as he completed his first term. Those challenges became larger after his reelection, putting an end to his administration’s grand regime ambitions. The public came to disapprove of his economic stewardship and the difficult military occupation of Iraq. Dissension within his own party arose about a series of White House missteps—the Katrina response, the aborted Supreme Court nomination of Harriet Miers, and the administration’s controversial Social Security and immigration reform plans.

Consider the fragility of several regime components during Bush’s presidency. The 2000 popular coalition that elected Bush amassed about 48 percent of the vote, half a million votes fewer than Al Gore received. In 2004, despite a spike in turnout yielding more than 59 million votes for Bush, he won a popular vote victory by a margin of less than three percentage points. Neither Congress nor the Supreme Court fell securely under long-term conservative control under Bush. Conservatives held a narrow 5-to-4 majority at the end of his presidency that could be easily overturned by a single future court appointment. Business and ideologically conservative interest groups did not continuously prevail on major issues in Washington and were frequently outgunned on important issues by opposing liberal groups (Hacker and Pierson 2007; Smith 2000; Berry 1999). Most major new ideas and policy commitments came from the Bush White House; other components of the Reagan regime seemed content with a more conventional conservative agenda, one that did not seem to be growing in popular appeal (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2007, 272–79).

After 2004, the GOP regime fell into disarray. Republicans lost control of both congressional chambers in 2006 and seemed unlikely to regain control of them anytime soon. Bitter partisan contestation, chronicled here by John J. Pitney Jr., became the norm in Congress and throughout Washington. Bush himself suffered a big drop in popular approval, detailed by John Kenneth White and John Zogby in their chapter, which

greatly curtailed his influence in Washington. The risks Bush undertook did not reward his regime with political preeminence.

Clinton the Preemptor

At the end of Bush's second term, Skowronek's politics of "permanent preemption" seemed an apposite description of contemporary national politics, in which presidents faced "the proliferation of interests and authorities throughout the government and the organizational resilience of the institutions that defend them" (Skowronek 1997, 443). In such a situation, regime construction or renewal is extremely difficult. A prudent presidential strategy in this situation is that followed by Bush's predecessor, Bill Clinton, in which presidents "build new, personal bases of political support outside of regular political alliances and often outside of institutional politics altogether" (Skowronek 1997, 44).

Clinton was tactically nimble (after his many political mistakes of 1993–1994), announcing domestic policies poll tested to appeal to swing voters and "triangulating" between Democrats and Republicans in his dealings with Congress. Clinton's project was not regime maintenance but rather, as is the mission of "preemptive presidents," tactically to master a difficult environment established by the hostile presidential regime that preceded him. The incomplete nature of Reagan's reconstruction lowered the cost of Clinton's improvisations until he laid himself low with scandal. Conservative forces in Congress and in the public forced him to pay the steep price of impeachment.

Though George W. Bush confronted a political environment similar to the one that Bill Clinton encountered, Bush's mode of governance differed from that of Clinton. The politics of preemption often involves personal attacks on presidents because no single regime is fully in control of government. Resurgent Republicans in the late 1990s, envisioning regime restoration, thus pilloried Clinton in harsh terms. Democratic politicians and activists loudly announced their low esteem of Bush, particularly after his aggressive use of his office to win, narrowly, the 2002 elections. That chorus only grew in volume and intensity as his presidency proceeded. Politics in a preemptive era usually produces little regime construction and a reduced policy legacy for incumbent presidents. That seems a fair thumbnail summary of the Clinton legacy. Bush, however, sought far more than the largely personal stamp on leadership and policy that Clinton pursued. As John F. Harris puts it in his chapter here, Bush sought primarily to win partisan victories as a "national clarifier," but Clinton sought to govern

from the middle as a “national unifier,” a position, he thought, of political strength. For George W. Bush, conservative regime restoration through electoral domination and a strong policy legacy were the measures of presidential success. This is a big ambition, indeed, and, as we have seen, it brings many political risks. Bush’s experience suggests the prospects for success at this are limited in contemporary politics. Bush’s successor Barack Obama and his supportive Democratic majorities in Congress will test those limits yet again.

Bush’s Strategy and Tactics

The Bush presidency pursued its grand design with much adroitness in its early years. The initial task involved demonstrating presidential leadership in the absence of an electoral mandate. This Bush did very well, in part by adopting some preemptive tactics of his predecessor. He came into office stating that he wished to “change the tone” in Washington through pursuing personal, less partisan leadership. True to his word, he personally persuaded a handful of conservative Senate Democrats to pass his tax bill and worked well with liberal Democrats to get his education bill passed into law. At the same time, Bush kept unvarying party unity among congressional Republicans.

In the wake of his great popularity after 9/11, however, a more partisan style appeared, well documented in the chapters by Bertram Johnson and John F. Harris. Bush’s 2002 campaigning was party based and unusually aggressive. At the center of his 2003 agenda were orthodox conservative items—a large tax cut and possible war with Iraq—and an innovative proposal for Medicare prescription drug coverage for seniors. Bush’s success in Congress in 2003, as Bertram Johnson notes in his chapter, came primarily through party-line votes. The administration’s 2004 reelection strategy also seems based on a central imperative of maintaining strong party unity behind the president. The strategy, as one White House aide put it, “has to be to hold what you start with and then change the dynamics of four percent or five percent total. It’s not like you’re trying to build sixty percent of the vote, but rather build to fifty-two percent” (Brownstein 2002, 1). The primacy of regime maintenance put a ceiling on Bush’s likely vote, given the political weaknesses of the regime he sought to restore.

Despite this emphasis on regime maintenance, Bush consistently employed some of Bill Clinton’s political tactics. Both White Houses sought to govern by campaigning, having the president “go public” in a “perma-

ment campaign” seeking agenda domination (Kernell 1997; Mann and Ornstein 2000). The Clinton presidency became famous for shaping its policy agenda according to poll results (Harris 2000). Pollsters had a much less public presence in the Bush administration, and Bush paid much less personal attention to poll results than did Clinton. Still, Karl Rove, Bush’s chief strategist, pored over polls regularly. Poll results ultimately played an important role in shaping Bush administration tactics, just as they had in previous administrations. Still, for all of the polling and campaigning, Bush failed to move public opinion in his direction on many issues (Edwards 2007). His governing agenda and personal advocacy efforts were unable to transform the entrenched and evenly balanced partisanship in American politics.

Similar tactics, dissimilar ends. The Bush administration engaged in a permanent campaign for public support, touted and traded on the personal popularity of the incumbent, targeted swing voters in the electorate with its appeals, and tactically emphasized issues that might boost its political prospects. The Clinton administration did the same. However, Bill Clinton after 1994 was protecting himself in a hostile political environment and did little to tie himself publicly to his congressional Democrats or to create lasting political advantages for his political party, which at times split internally in response to his great flexibility on issues. George W. Bush’s pursuit of a lasting conservative policy regime was comparatively far more ambitious and risky a goal than that of his predecessor. Bush rode that approach to a narrow supremacy that adverse events quickly transformed into a political fall.

Bush’s “regime” helps to explain his superior issue discipline compared to that found in Clinton’s more personal politics. Clinton’s improvisational style, ranging from issue to issue, stands in stark contrast to Bush’s dogged focus on a few issues. If the issues are well chosen, limited focus can be a great tactical asset to a president. Given the large regime task Bush set for himself, such discipline was essential. The Bush White House pursued several issues in order to “take them away” from Democrats—by achieving credibility with the public on a number of issues on which Democrats have traditionally been more trusted. The great example of 2001 was education; in 2003, it was a Medicare prescription drug benefit. A similar attempt in 2005 on Social Security overreached and failed. The long-term gains of such tactics were quite limited. By 2008, strong majorities of the public preferred Democrats to Republicans on health care,

education, and Social Security (Pew Research Center poll 2008). Bush's successor Barack Obama and his fellow Democrats enjoyed public backing on these issues as they began governing in 2009.

A Dangerous Opportunity

The 9/11 attacks gave George W. Bush considerable political capital. He spent much of it in the 2002 election, taking a risk that aggressive partisan campaigning would pay off. It did, narrowly. Still quite popular in early 2003, Bush took three other risks. First, he proposed to cut taxes by \$726 billion through 2013, despite short-term deficit forecasts—that did not include the costs of the Iraq war—exceeding \$300 billion per year. Second, he proposed a prescription-drug benefit for Medicare recipients that required them to enter managed-care plans to receive the benefit. Third, he pressed a war against Iraq despite widespread opposition from major allies. All of these risks fit his role as an orthodox innovator. The Iraq war and tax cuts fit the aggressive foreign policy and supply-side economic policy of Reagan. The Medicare plan attempted to neutralize one of the Democrats' best domestic issues for 2004.

Not all risks pay off. The Medicare plan eventually passed Congress by the narrowest of margins but failed to improve public perceptions of the GOP on health care. The Bush tax cuts produced large budget deficits that aided the GOP strategy of limiting spending by reducing revenues—"starving the beast"—but the deficits contributed to public disapproval of Bush's economic stewardship. The initial military success in Iraq boosted public approval of Bush and the GOP, but the turbulent military occupation of the country produced persistent problems for the administration. Bush's rocky tenure during his second term grew from the difficulty of the task he set for himself. Aiming to consistently "swing for the fences," he, like the proverbial power hitter in baseball, frequently struck out as events and opponents threw him difficult pitches. John F. Harris suggests here that Bush might have had more success by operating as Bill Clinton did, courting personal popularity in a Washington of even partisan balance and recalcitrant political institutions. But for Bush, personal popularity was merely a means to be used—and at times sacrificed—in the service of the greater end of conservative regime restoration.

The Bush presidency thus involved a grand paradox. A president must garner personal popularity in order to address other Washington institutions from a position of political strength. Yet Bush's fealty to a conservative policy regime required him to expend his political capital in its

service, which put his personal survival at risk. This would have turned out well if that regime had received the lasting embrace of a majority of voters. However, it did not. George W. Bush took risks and spent political capital on a regime project that was unlikely to succeed in any event. If Skowronek is right, and Washington authority structures are so impervious to presidential change that regime construction is impossible, then political time—and the ability to build political authority structures that outlast any administration’s time in office—has vanished. George Bush gambled that he could deploy the power of his office to resurrect political time. His presidency suggests, however, that political time is no longer with us. If political time does reappear, ironically for Bush it will be his successor Barack Obama and his fellow Democrats who will resurrect it.