

Introduction: The Bulldozer Stays Its Course

The second inauguration of George W. Bush overflowed with Shakespearean potential. After a bitterly contested campaign, the president of the United States got what he wished for: uninterrupted power, renewed and rewarded. On November 2, 2004, the most powerful man in the most powerful nation in the world passed through what he called his “accountability moment”¹ and strode victorious through a battlefield littered with ruined enemies. Abroad, Saddam Hussein was his prisoner; at home, John Kerry and Tom Daschle lay at his feet. For months and years to come, congressional majorities, legislative successes, and judicial appointments were seemingly guaranteed to Bush and the vigorous Republican Party he had escorted into the twenty-first century.

Bush was nothing if not ready to claim mandates. On taking office the first time, in 2001, he had unblushingly claimed a mandate from a *minority* popular vote and a dubious victory in Florida, a state whose governing apparatus was commanded by his brother, after an incomprehensible court decision orchestrated by his political allies. Now, with a three-million-vote popular margin

on top of an electoral college victory, he could claim a full-bodied majority and press his advantage without limits. He could, in effect, eviscerate the legislature by issuing “signing statements” in which he declared that a portion of the law he had just signed was unconstitutional and therefore he had no intention of following it.² (Bush’s statements objected to some eight hundred provisions in more than one hundred laws.) He could arrange for leaks and the plugging of leaks as he liked, preside over whispering campaigns, and issue secret and executive orders to deflect counterbalancing pressures within the government. From his pinnacle of power he could behold the next range of peaks, accessible in turn. “Now comes the revolution,” declared the conservative direct-mail pioneer Richard Viguerie the day after the votes were counted.³ Surely, the Republican Party, and in particular its conservative base, owned the American future. Surely, unswerving leadership paid off. How the mighty had risen!

To hubris, apparently. At precisely the moment when Bush stood so splendidly vindicated, the radical right-wing ascendancy had actually peaked. As I write, President George W. Bush’s approval ratings bob around below 40 percent, where they have slumped for more than twelve months in a row⁴—even scraping as low as 28 percent, a territory previously reserved for the second-term Harry Truman, the Watergate-battered Richard Nixon, and the inflation- and hostage-ridden Jimmy Carter. Bush lost his iron grip on his own party, so much so as to require compromise on immigration and, even more gravely, recourse to a veto for the first time in his presidency because eighteen Republican senators (including the majority leader, Dr. Bill Frist, and his predecessor, Trent Lott) voted against his hard-and-fast position stopping stem cell research.⁵ It was no longer true that the White House automatically controlled the House by the simple expedient of requiring that all legislation be approved by a majority of the Republican majority.⁶

A flood of undeniable facts washed away the Republican reputation. Governing from the right was no longer smart politics. Having consolidated itself into a party of top-down discipline, Bush’s Republicans could not shield themselves from the rot at the top. The midterm election turned into a referendum on Bush.

I started counting blessings midafternoon on Election Day 2006, four counties due north of Manhattan, sitting behind a table in the volunteer firehouse—the trophies mounted in front of the rear brick wall—in the hamlet of Stockport, New York, population 2,933. This was an election district where Republicans outnumbered Democrats almost four to one. I had volunteered as a poll watcher and was charged with keeping tabs on Democratic voters so that late-in-the-day get-out-the-vote calls could be made to remind latecomers to turn out before 9 p.m. I was vigilant, also, in case any vote-suppressing hanky-panky materialized. None did.⁷

I sat, yellow marking pen in hand, chatting amiably with my Republican counterpart, a trailer-park resident named Sue who was in her sixties and who wore a substantial cross around her neck. She warmed as she spoke of the recent baptism of her thirteenth grandchild. In front of me were two copies of a list of all the registered Democrats in the election district, 239 of them, supplemented by the names of 32 other voters identified as likely to vote Democratic that year. As our people voted, I crossed off their names. Later, an emissary would whisk the list off to another Democratic volunteer who would call the remaining prospects.

After canvassing in the area, I'd been recruited all of sixty hours before the polls opened. The Monday night before the election, watchers were still trouble-shooting by conference call, getting shunted from one election district to another, receiving instructions from the Democrats' lawyer in the course of a conversation rife with interruption. This unruly, seat-of-the-pants operation was the Democrats' counterweight to the notoriously efficient and fearful Republican get-out-the-vote operation.

Still, the Democratic volunteers did volunteer, the assignments were made, and the information got out. Came Election Day, whiling away the hours, I started keeping count and realized that Democrats were turning out in higher percentages than Republicans. I counted afresh every couple of hours, afraid that my wish might be proving stronger than my accuracy. The Democrats' percentages were not vastly higher, but sufficiently so, and consistently, to win if this kept up. It did.

The state legislature had carved New York's Twentieth Congressional District out of rural areas ranging from the Hudson Valley south of Albany to the Adirondacks north of Albany while skirting the capital city. The incumbent, Republican John Sweeney, had won reelection in 2004 with 66 percent of the vote. Sweeney, a top state Republican operative since the early nineties, had a 10 percent approval rating from the National Abortion Rights Action League, 15 percent from the League of Conservation Voters, 18 percent from the National Education Association, 27 percent from the American Civil Liberties Union, and 69 percent from the Christian Coalition.⁸ He was best known to his enemies for shouting "Shut it down!" to a Republican mob in Miami the day before Thanksgiving 2000, in what the *Wall Street Journal* columnist Paul Gigot celebrated as a "bourgeois riot."⁹ The mob proceeded to bang on the doors of the electoral commission, stopping cold the recount of Miami-Dade ballots. Sweeney called the commissioners "thugs." His heroics made him a national Republican hero; earned him a coveted nickname from President Bush, "Congressman Kickass"; and won him a seat on the House Appropriations Committee, a premium perch from which to bring home local bacon.¹⁰

As usual, the district bristled with local factors. Sweeney had a history of boozing. On January 23, 2001, not long after being sworn in for his second term and fresh from a visit to a local bar, he drove his car into a utility pole in his district, knocking out power for eight hours. The state trooper summoned to the scene did not administer a sobriety test, ask the congressman whether he had been drinking, charge him, or ticket him.¹¹ Now, on Halloween 2006, one week before the election, Sweeney was revealed by the *Albany Times-Union* to have "knocked" his wife "around" (her words to a police dispatcher) the previous December.¹² If any more diagrams needed to be drawn depicting the abyss separating Republican declarations of moral fervor and documented illustrations of their moral turpitude, here was another one.

In this classically gerrymandered district, which went for George Bush by 54 percent in 2004, this time, when the votes were counted, Kirsten Gillibrand, a well-connected Democratic lawyer and

first-time political candidate, had left Sweeney in the dust, reversing the vote and winning 53 percent, a margin of 13,642 votes.

So it went in dozens of congressional districts on November 7. How did the Democrats reverse the Republican juggernaut? The short answer is: the Democrats were on fire. So were disillusioned Republicans. Together they burned to curtail, contain, and punish Bush. They hated Bush more intensely than Bush's minority of admirers burned to reward him.

Hatred of Bush—of his no-way-out war, his criminal negligence, his useless moralism, his fiscal recklessness, his corruption and all-around malfeasance—all this amounted to an impressive negativity, and surely it was this negativity that ignited victory on November 7. Sheer, shared hatred set off a backfire that sealed off the largely solid Confederacy—the peculiar region that Karl Rove and Bush had believed was the base of their base, the core of their dreamed-for, enduring Republican majority. On November 8, their dream smelled like ash.

The Republicans had run in 2002, 2004, and 2006 as the party of fear. *Vote for us or evildoers will blow up your cities*—that was their bumper sticker. They presented themselves as Paul Reveres, but at the same time they were themselves the orchestrators of fear, fearsome themselves, demanding subservience from anyone who would differ from them about how to protect the nation.

This looked like a winner. After all, almost five hundred years ago, hadn't Machiavelli written the book on George Bush and his Republican Party? "It is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with." But perhaps when Karl Rove underlined his edition of *The Prince*, he got so excited at this point that he skipped the following paragraph, which begins, "Nevertheless a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred."¹³

Seemingly indifferent to the hatred he courted, Bush gave the opposition a heck of a *raison d'être*. When my wife and I canvassed upstate, we found amid many indifferent voters several who wanted to talk about how awful things—and Republicans—were *in general*. When I made get-out-the-vote calls to various states for MoveOn, and (as the script requested) asked pro-Democratic

voters which issues weighed with them, they insisted to the last woman and man that there was no *particular* issue—it was “everything.” When I asked one woman the boilerplate question “Do you think the country’s on the right track?” her eloquent response was an extended throaty laugh. These people had had enough.

So the midterm election was a national vote of no-confidence—and more. What with Bush’s overreaching and underperforming, the Democrats willy-nilly became the big-tent party. Since 2004, they had been taking measurements, laying out canvas, and putting up poles. Fueled by both the netroots and a party apparatus coming to life, they availed themselves (teeth-grittingly, at times) of all the anti-Bush currents in American life. *All* of them—the liberal (progressive, if you like), the conservative (in the rock-ribbed fiscal sense), the keep-government-out-of-the-bedroom types along with the keep-government-hands-off-my-gun types, all the frowners who couldn’t be happy-talked out of the evidence of their senses.

This did not add up to a liberal majority—let alone a lock on 2008—but rather, it was a mighty embarrassment for those who thought they were relentlessly building an irreversible majority on the right. As Salon.com’s Tim Grieve noted, there was not one state or district in the country where voters evicted an incumbent “in favor of someone more conservative.” All kinds of Democrats won (and lost). Regardless of their views on the culture wars, more of the newcomers would be economic progressives than procorporate hacks—even in Virginia and Montana. The United States of America is not a left-wing country, but it would no longer have twenty-eight Republican governors. It would now have twenty-eight *Democratic* governors. As for the state legislatures where leaders learn the ropes and try out policies and (not least) redistricting happens, according to the nonpartisan National Conference of State Legislatures: “Before the election, Republicans controlled 20 state legislatures; Democrats 19 and 10 were split.” Now the Democrats would “control both houses of the legislature in 23 states; Republicans in 16 and 10 are split.”

Why Bush’s epoch-making triumph should have melted away so rapidly is an interesting question to which the answer is by no

means self-evident. The prevalent theory is that Bush finally fell afoul of reality—dire events he could neither control nor conceal—as the logic of his commitment to the fantastical, and his consequent malfeasance, played out. Chill winds came up one after the other, as they were bound to, and his purported new clothes proved unimpressive. Even sycophants could see that the man was covered in goose bumps. Catastrophes arrived in biblical proportions: calamities in Iraq, deluges on the Gulf Coast. Cronyism, corruption, and criminality were evoked by Republican household names: DeLay, Abramoff, “Brownie,” Libby, Rove, Cunningham, Foley. The past master of events was repeatedly confounded by events he could not master. As he floundered, he dwindled into a less implacable force. He struck less fear in the hearts of his enemies—even in the hearts of his friends—and more contempt. His initiatives began to fail: Social Security privatization, the Dubai port deal. His far-right culture-war grandstanding—gay marriage, Terri Schiavo, intelligent design—did not succeed in impressing a public whose priorities ran to more mundane travails. The press, which for years had been bending over backward to honor his majesty, became (at least fitfully) rambunctious and disrespectful. Although Bush could claim some second-term victories—placing two conservatives on the Supreme Court, for example—he found himself looking like a liability to many Republicans who had never before doubted that he was their asset in chief. Republican politicians found themselves avoiding photo ops, calling themselves “independents,” and dashing madly around their states in order to avoid side-by-side appearances with their titular leader. In the midterm elections, Bush, in a refreshing resort to plain talk, acknowledged that his presidency took a “thumpin’.”

Bush’s declining fortunes after March 2003 surely followed in no small part from the sinking popularity of the Iraq venture. Professor John Mueller, a reigning expert on presidents and public opinion in wartime, has argued that in Iraq, as in Korea and Vietnam, public support started off robust and proceeded to fall off steeply—even faster in Iraq than in the previous two big wars—and that once it declined, it might level off or fall off at a declining rate, but it never returned to the heady levels with which the war began.¹⁴ It didn’t

matter whether the war was accompanied by a fierce, steady antiwar movement (Vietnam, but neither Korea nor Iraq), or drenched in television coverage (Vietnam and Iraq, but not Korea), including pictures of American coffins (Vietnam, but neither Korea nor Iraq), or whether the opposition party was vague about its proposed remedy (all three). When hundreds or thousands of American soldiers fell in a dead-ended war, or what was perceived to be a dead-ended war, the news all by itself undermined the president's standing.

Whatever the precise causes of Bush's decline, the outcome is clear. Power in decomposition is not a pretty sight. The beneficiaries of power could no longer assume that uncomplicated loyalty to George W. Bush solved their political problems. Problems hitherto regarded as solved turned out not to be solved at all. About success there is always an aura that radiates downward, and about unsuccess, the same is equally true.

Consequently, from Congress to the Pentagon, and among pundits who for years had lined up to display loyalty to the leader, conservatives loosened their tongues, scoured their résumés, and sharpened their long knives—this time for one another. Brassy trumpet calls recorded Bush's decline and fall, even heralded the possibility that it was deserved—because Bush had hijacked conservatism and betrayed it, rather than escorting it to triumph. Respectable opinion began to ask whether Bush's popularity was irretrievable and the long opprobrium of history irreversible.

As Bush's popularity slid, so did the prospects of the master coalition that the president once seemed, to friends and enemies alike, to represent. Not so long ago, Republican strategists crowed that they had engineered a massive turn in America's political center of gravity. With the old Confederacy, its borders, most of the mountain states, and the Great Plains in their pockets, with a well-oiled (I confess that the double entendre is intentional) machine at their disposal, they were well along in the massive project of building a lasting majority. Having fused the energies (and money) of a mass social movement—the Christian right—with the commitments (and money) of pro-business conservatives, they had perfected a governing machine, exploited a submissive and

credulous press corps, and reduced a feckless opposition to scattered whimpers of protest from the wings.

They seemed, in other words, to have solved the master problem of contemporary politics: how to channel the energies of a passionate movement into the power apparatus of a skillful and well-led party. They were not only different ideologically from the Democrats—the distinction was dramatically clear from the moment George W. Bush stepped into the White House—but they were a different *kind* of party, with a different orientation toward politics. They were a bulldozer. They brooked no opposition.

Dissent did not slow them. Their machine not only won elections but, once in power, furthered their ability to win again and again while ruling from the right. While Democrats and liberals wandered since the 1960s in a wilderness of their own making, searching for themselves, complaining about each other, stuck with each other in a bad marriage—can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em—Republicans and conservatives pooled their energies, shared their rewards, lived with their differences, and laughed all the way to the White House and Capitol Hill, to church and bank, alike.

But Bush proved a disaster—not least because his character and worldview ill-equipped him to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States,” which was intended, after all, “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Whatever his slogans—“compassionate conservatism,” “ownership society,” “war on terror”—Bush was innocent of any thoughtful conception of “Justice” or “the general Welfare,” and his reputation for tending to “the common defense” was spectacularly overrated. His blunders were gifts to satirists, possibly the only occupational group besides oilmen and military contractors to thrive on his presidency. “He likes to be underestimated,” said one of the epigones of his governing method, euphemistically known (in an America that wants to be reassured that its affairs are being managed) as his “management style.”¹⁵ But if there were any more underestimation, Bush would be a pitiful, helpless cipher.

To see Bush as high-handed, limited, irrational, uninformed, inept, mendacious, reckless, feckless, vicious, and dangerous, and to bash him accordingly, is far easier than to explain how a man so high-handed, limited, irrational, uninformed, inept, mendacious, reckless, vicious, and dangerous succeeded in rising to power as the adored hero of a victorious political party and political movement—"Mr. Right," as the Christian conservative leader Ralph Reed called him in a 1999 cover story in *National Review*,¹⁶ or "The Right Man," as his erstwhile speechwriter David Frum called him later. Reed wrote:

His charisma is Reaganesque, and his stump skills are already legendary. The strongest case for Bush is based on his conservatism, not his viability. . . . As president, Bush would prod Congress to move on his priorities: cutting taxes, modernizing entitlements, and restoring values. . . . And most refreshingly, Bush has shown a willingness to engage his liberal foes. . . . This aggressiveness [in tort reform and opposition to trial lawyers], as much as his stands on the issues, is vital to the future of conservatism. . . . Bush believes what conservatives believe, and he will give conservatism a smile again.

As many moderates and some conservatives eventually danced away from Bush's embrace, at least temporarily, those who had supported him at the outset but at some point discovered his policies to be mistaken or even disastrous were not particularly interested in asking the questions: Did he change between the time they had heralded him as a conservative hero and the time they threw up their hands over his betrayal of conservative values? Was his stupendous ineptitude a sign, perhaps, that they had missed something essential in his nature way back in the glory days when they had welcomed him unquestioningly into their hearts? And even: was his nature itself a fitting expression of the core of the movement they swore by?

For Bush did not drop out of the blue onto the center stage of American—and therefore world—history. He was, like almost all successful politicians in even feebly democratic societies, the voice of a crowd, and his ascendancy resulted from a social collaboration.

A critical mass of supporters recognized him as *theirs*—a sort of delegate, even an emanation of their identity, a mirror in which they could recognize themselves. His usurpation of power, his abuse of presidential authority, his ignorant deployment of national force abroad, his imperviousness to dissent were not departures from the main line of conservative opinion but an expression of its main logic—the movement party as bulldozer. Bush was not just an ideologue, not just the defender of one particular set of policies over another. He was chosen to lead the United States of America not only because the voting public preferred his views, pragmatically, to the alternatives—not only because of what he thought but because of who he was, or seemed to be; because of his style, which they took to disclose his true character. If he was the decider, it was because, in some part of their selves, they were willing to be—they *wanted* to be—the decided.¹⁷

In other words, when voters cast their ballots in 2004, they were making an existential choice, declaring how they felt about George W. Bush. The question they were answering was, Which side are you on? A little political science will clarify. Despite the pack-journalism predilection for a postelection story line attributing Bush's victory to his dominance among so-called values voters, the gay marriage bans that grassroots conservatives placed on swing-state ballots seem not to have been a major factor—except possibly in Ohio.¹⁸ Nationally, far more important was the fear of terrorism and the support that Bush gained from his partisans who translated the fear of terrorism into support for his war in Iraq.¹⁹

Moreover, Bush benefited from a deep partisan divide over the value of the Iraq war. Even though Democratic and Republican voters did not diverge in their overall beliefs about foreign policy, and a sizable majority (59 percent) thought that “the Iraq war was not worth it,” Bush won 94 percent of the prowar minority, while Kerry won only 78 percent of the majority.²⁰ How to explain this discrepancy? Why were so many voters inclined to support Bush while disagreeing with him on such a central issue? The voters diverged in their attitudes toward . . . the character of George W. Bush.²¹ Was he “moral”? Did he “provide strong leadership”? “Really care about people like you”? Was he “knowledgeable”?

“Intelligent”? “Dishonest”?²² Although al-Qaeda committed the September 11 massacres on Bush’s watch, after months of Bush ignoring ample and urgent warnings cropping up throughout the intelligence services, Bush’s supporters gave him a pass. In their eyes, he was the man who could do no wrong.

Talk about an investor class: Bush’s truest believers invested him, or some idealized version of him they carried in their hearts, with their powers of judgment. The president was not only their president but their shaman, their designated teller of truth. He spoke to them, for them, with them so certainly and with such panache as to cancel out the retrograde stuff of “discernible reality,” to use a Bush adviser’s contemptuous term for the merely empirical. Because Bush spent months maintaining that Saddam Hussein harbored weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to war, his most devoted followers were not only prepared to maintain that Saddam had had them, they were inclined to think that they had been found—even though Bush had long since abandoned any such claim.

If this seems outlandish, consider some statistics on what Americans of different parties believed about facts on the ground in Iraq. In 2005, two years after the American invasion, 79 percent of Republicans (and 37 percent of Democrats) still believed that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction when the war began. In March 2006, 30 percent of Republicans believed that “clear evidence of weapons of mass destruction” had actually been found in Iraq. Thirty-two percent of Republicans with some postcollege education believed it, while none of the Democrats with equivalent education did so. Two-thirds of Republicans (as against some 26 percent of Democrats and 40 percent of independents) believed that clear evidence that Saddam had supported al-Qaeda had also been found. The *best*-educated Republicans, those holding more than a college degree, were more likely to believe this than were the *least*-educated Democrats, those with high school degrees or less.²³ If the words *willful* and *delusional* are not suitable for describing such beliefs, when are they suitable? We are in the presence of nothing less than a will to believe. Not incidentally, thanks to talk radio, cable television, and the other

communication circuits of the Christian right, people possessed of this will to believe could breathe the recycled air of a self-enclosed ideological universe.

If Bush's base was made up significantly of fervent Christian soldiers, Bush was their fervent Christian general: their leader as deputy, representing a spirit, a mood, an approach to life that—to use the word in vogue—*resonated*. He was an impresario—a conductor of popular currents. If he governed “with his gut,” that was how *they*, in the secret or not-so-secret recesses of their hearts, wished to govern—and be governed. If he arranged to be surrounded by yes men, rigging the advice he was getting, dismissing contrary facts and views, blithely discarding inconvenient experts, refusing to step outside a charmed circle of sycophants, they not only liked the outcomes, they trusted him to lead them that way because, with his use of insider phrases as signals of common membership among the elect, he flattered them that they were among the chosen few worth listening to. Where war, environmental despoliation, constitutional integrity, and economic policy were concerned, he may have had a penchant for the phantasmagorical, but when it came to politics Bush was a realist. However limited his life experience, however modest his capacity for persuasion, this modern Prince had a feeling for his constituency—what it craved and what it feared. It was not lost on him that his persona, the happy combination of his dynastic position and his Christian rebirth, warmed the hearts of millions. Their fervent support was his art form. What he believed, others believed. What he didn't know, others didn't know—or didn't need to know. What he refused to know, they refused to know, too.

One of the most challenging of intellectual and perceptual tasks is to regain the capacity to be surprised by reality. If you have a working nervous system, you should jump up, startled, when lightning strikes. This is what Proust meant when he wrote, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” Lose that capacity and your mind is muffled. You succumb to the ho-hum sluggishness or, better, the pleasant buzz of everyday life. To avoid this muffling and flatness, you need to see through the sheen of normality to the downright

strangeness of what exists—a president who openly expresses contempt for law, for science, for journalists, for uncongenial opinions, and for the findings of his own Central Intelligence Agency; who recognizes no limit to his executive power, launches a war amid the Arab world without any coherent purpose, appoints as head of the Federal Emergency Management Administration a man with no experience whatever in managing emergencies, and flies in the face of his own experts to deny that colossal climate change has human origins.

We need to recover our astonishment, not for its own sake or for the grim pleasure of frightening ourselves, but to ignite curiosity as to the origins of this calamity. We must overcome our intellectual numbness and cease to treat Bush as an ordinary president who came to office in the ordinary way and operates in an ordinary manner. We begin to discern a pattern and a lineage in this strangeness.

This is what I attempt in part one of this book: to make as plain in general contour as I know how, and in a voice I hope to be adequate to the immensity of this collective breakdown of decent government, the starkness and strangeness of the Bush years, the conditions for his emergence, and the roots, logic, and meanings of this baleful and harrowing episode in our collective history. I go to the trouble of reviewing this history not because it gives me any pleasure to rehash the awfulness or because there is anything much to be gained by claiming once more just how ruinous these years have been or because many of the facts to come in part one are new to the light of day: to the contrary, I am deeply and gratefully dependent on the reporting of many writers over many years. But I hope to illuminate the larger meaning of Bush and his movement and, further, to make a useful argument about what can be learned toward the prospect of recovery.

To my disappointment, and perhaps that of most readers, part one will not, however, serve as prelude to a triumphal conclusion—not quite, not yet. For the political forces that might usher in that triumphal conclusion are late, confused, bedraggled, and disarrayed. While the Republicans were creating a unified power machine driven by the energy of a relatively simple alliance of movements directed against a single enemy—liberals—the Democrats

were collecting a loose assemblage of fragments lacking the coherence and force to move the nation in a common direction.

While the Republicans were establishing their entitlement to rule, in fervent belief that the natural order *required* them to rule in the name of a truth that they brandished, in the conviction that this truth by which they ruled was self-evident, the Democrats were often searching for truth rather than brandishing it. While the Republicans were rising to the heights of their collective ambition, summoning leaders who thrilled their base and personified (not least in their appearance) their ideals, men who ratified their identity, talked their talk, and (at least some of the time) walked their walk, expressing in their demeanor their fancies, their boldness, their sense of mission, the Democrats frequently resorted to leaders who, for the most part, personified their failures—their fecklessness and their disconnection from the drive and confidence of popular movements.

Today, there are progressive movements but, at this writing, not enough of a progressive *movement*. There are Democrats galore, but not enough consistency in the reasons that anyone else should be convinced to join the ranks. The relation between the Democrats and the liberals (whether they brand themselves as progressives or not) is tormented. Still, there are serious prospects for not only short-term but long-term revival. Conspicuous among the Democrats in the Bush years are a growing number of activists who see the party as the new movement—as a phalanx overcoming differences to unite commitment and common principle. Bush in decline might prove to be the ignition for a lasting revival of the liberal project. In part two, I try to assay the roots of the Democratic discontents and the dynamics of movement and party that have shaped liberal history and will shape the liberal fate. In part three, I assess the prospects for a lasting renewal.

Should it turn out that Bush's slippage is irreversible, as seems likely at this writing, and his ability to pile more disasters on top of those already committed dwindles further, the catastrophe of his presidency will not vanish. Should he be succeeded by a prince among men or a princess among women, a Lincoln to his Buchanan or an FDR to his Hoover, salvation will not be nigh and the disaster

will long outlast the disaster maker in the form of negligent government, sweeping corruption, fiscal absurdity, and the surplus fear and loathing that accrue toward the United States almost everywhere in the world. For a long time to come it will be essential for both intellectual and practical reasons to understand how Bush and his inner circle arrived at a position to do the damage they did. Not only did they lay their hands on history to propel the nation into a momentous and catastrophic war, but they threaten to do more of the same until the sun sets on their last day in office. They established a reign of secrecy, deception, lawlessness, and unreason unrivaled in living memory—very possibly in all the history of the republic. They invited private interests to devise public policy to a degree drastically understated by the word *corruption*. They took startling risks with the physical underpinnings of planet Earth. They loaded unprecedented debt onto the nation's economy. They denied scientific evidence on life-and-death questions. So the rise of this power elite proved to be—and will continue to be—momentous for the history of the world.

The core of their rule is a bulldozer approach to reality—belligerence as an all-purpose style, whether facing domestic critics or the rest of the world. This was true already in the months through September 10, 2001, when they promoted missile defense, abrogated the ABM treaty, renounced the Kyoto agreement, and confronted China. But then, they were a war clique scuttling in circles for lack of a war. Al-Qaeda gave them a demonstrable enemy. After the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, those in the Bush circle came into their own as war fighters, though the practicalities of war—its diplomacy, its justifications, its strategy, and its planning—were all beyond them. They were idealists of war: that is, they took the idea of war more seriously than the on-the-ground requirements of war. War was their defining mystique. But the mystique of war—the calling to war, the spirit of combat, and the aura of “mission accomplished”—engaged them more than did the raw, ugly, and difficult practice. All the great strategists have known that in order to succeed, war must be a rational activity, tailoring appropriate means to attainable ends. Bush's inner circle, the commanders of policy, floated too far off the ground to be real

masters of war. However impressive the technical means at their disposal, they were too detached from reality to command intelligently. They were mastered by war.

Therefore, outside the dwindling ranks of their truest believers, abroad and at home, they forfeited trust. As the war in Iraq continued, new waves of jihadis in Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere found in this American expedition a precise confirmation of their most Manichean scenarios. American credibility, as a result, is rubble. Meanwhile, the Bush budget deficits will tie the hands of administrations for decades (perhaps, like Reagan's, one of their purposes).

The power triad—Bush himself, along with Dick Cheney and (through 2006) Donald Rumsfeld, with a shifting cast of subordinate insiders, presiding over small staffs of trusted advisers—did not accomplish all these feats by dint of sheer force of will, though force of will they share in abundance.²⁴ They did so by presiding over a party and a political base that shared their purposes, methods, and mentality. They were consolidators of power in behalf of a movement with demonological fervor and absolutist pretensions, a movement that, with everything at stake, saw no reason that the power of government should be limited as long as it was *their* government, for the strength of the righteous brooked no justified dissent and the power of the righteous could not, by definition, be abused. They could succeed in acquiring executive power and consolidating it only by mobilizing a reliable and enthusiastic base—and the base could only realize its passions by submitting to righteous leadership, or, if principle caused any qualms about Bush's closed and deceptive habits, agreeing to overlook their standard-bearer's weaknesses and close ranks.

Power of this degree and scope is not built up in a day. "Building a movement," as the conservative base-builders Richard Viguerie and David Franke wrote, "requires decades."²⁵ Into its fifth decade now, the Republican movement-as-party is a blended coalition of interests and passions fused at its crowning moments by a supreme hero—first Barry Goldwater, then Ronald Reagan, then George W. Bush. Never underestimate the significance of the leader. Without Reagan, there was no Reaganism. But without a

conservative movement, there was no Reagan and consequently no President George W. Bush.

The United States is, to put it mildly, a sprawling and complicated society, so any American party that hopes to be national must blend and represent multiple interests. But the Republican Party that holds power is a *focused* coalition with two, and only two, major components—the low-tax, love-business, hate-government enthusiasts and the God-save-us moral crusaders. In the first instance, they are the voice of plutocracy. With the Republicans in power, the chief beneficiaries of the private economy never lack for friends in high places. A Republican government can be relied on to deregulate, cut taxes (primarily at the top), and subsidize. It blithely spins off governmental functions into corporate hands. It rewards wealth over work and great wealth over lesser wealth. Republican government believes in rewarding these corporations on the premise that what's good for them is good for the entire American people. Even if the income of much of the population stagnates, on the strength of their belligerent posture in the world and their reputation for protecting the nation despite their malfeasance through September 11, 2001, the Republican Party has succeeded in winning the votes of the white working class, especially of men. In a pinch, they can appeal to these voters, the erstwhile Reagan Democrats, on moralist (“value”) grounds, inviting them to overlook their own economic travails.

Second, the Republican Party is the voice of a particular version of militant faith—largely Christian, largely evangelical. The party speaks for the impassioned and embattled who, even as they lay claim to Christian values, carry—indeed, brandish—the scars of persecution by secular powers: their redeemer God banished from the public square, from Hollywood, from the textbooks and classrooms, their “culture of life” and conception of decency mocked daily by feminists, homosexuals, secular humanists, and the activist judges who protect them. With a passion born of moral certitude and an intense longing for the millennium when all that was wrong will be set right, they pile up proofs of the surrounding iniquity, proofs that enable them to see themselves as moral exemplars marooned in the Devil's decadent world, one becoming more

Satanic with every passing day and therefore—paradoxically—looming ever closer to salvation. The nature of this faith is such that events both positive and negative can only confirm it. The road to heaven is paved with tribulation.

The Republicans also encompass pockets of libertarians and old-school moderates, and various niche groups are helpful additions—Karl Rove for years proved adept at adding them²⁶—but these two large populations are essential. So a leader who honors the Republicans' two major constituencies is the right-wing ideal. Thus Reagan, thus George W. Bush.

And here is one crucial advantage that Republicans hold over Democrats: it goes without saying that it is far easier to blend two constituencies than the Democrats' roughly eight: labor, African Americans, Hispanics, feminists, gays, environmentalists, members of the helping professions (teachers, social workers, nurses), and the militantly liberal, especially antiwar denizens of avant-garde cultural zones such as university towns, the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and so on. (The categories obviously overlap somewhat.) This structural advantage also holds for the leader himself: it is easier to rise to party leadership if you personify a two-component coalition—if you are a God-fearing (though, like Reagan, church-avoiding) businessman—than if you are, say, a black lesbian nurse or a Latino wind-energy entrepreneur. It is also easier to coax one of two ideological tendencies (usually the Christian right) to compromise for the greater good of conservatism than it is to persuade an identity-based group (feminists, gays, African Americans) to make concessions on what is, after all, their identity as they see it.²⁷

Tribulation is now the lot of Republicans into the foreseeable future. Their success, after all, rested significantly on their reputation for success. In the great game of opportunism, which is the essence of practical political life, they borrowed heavily from their aura of inevitability. As their power peeled away, Republicans tangled on Iraq, immigration, torture—precisely the questions that their base cared passionately about.

Still, the party's immediate travails should not be permitted to obscure the immensity of its achievement and the endurance of its

machinery. For years now, the debates that have seized the country have chiefly been the debates that the Republican Party sparked: about tax cuts, preventive war, abortion bans, and immigration restrictions. Republicans' terminology (*tax relief, death tax, war on terror, partial-birth abortion*) became the prevailing terminology. Their slash-and-burn style became standard, their symbolic winks, smears, and dirty tricks drowning contrary facts and passing so many electoral tests—all the way back to Reagan launching his 1980 campaign with a speech defending "states' rights" in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the city where three civil-rights workers happened to have been murdered by local authorities in 1964; then continued in the playing of the Willie Horton card by the president's father in 1988—as to have become predictable elements of the Republicans' campaign arsenal (even when the enemies were other Republicans, as John McCain discovered in the 2000 South Carolina primary).

A heedless, lawless, incompetent presidency; an interminable war; a profoundly corrupted ruling party; a deep disdain for reason—these are among the breathtaking achievements of the conservative movement in power. Antigovernment rhetoric is the haze behind which the movement's leaders abuse power while undercutting the government's ability to conduct itself efficaciously, not to mention constitutionally. No matter how much rhetoric flows forth about the virtues of limited government, the movement party has not hesitated to avail itself of the apparatus of rule, dismantling regulations, awarding favors to its bankrollers, installing unqualified partisans to important positions, sabotaging competent civil servants, concealing government operations behind a curtain of secrecy, and above all pursuing a militant and military approach to the larger world. As anomalous as George W. Bush appears, his style of rule is not exactly original. The right espies a hazy glow emanating from the Reagan years, the better to invent a tradition it can rest comfortably in. Liberals sometimes nod, since from a present-day vantage point nothing seems to them comparable in malfeasance to the Bush fiasco. But in manifold ways Bush's government enlarges upon central themes—and methods—of Reagan's administration, which also taxed work above wealth,

encouraged economic inequality, bent and broke unions, cut back voting rights, turned public resources over to extractive industry, devalued diplomacy, imposed a simplistic model of foreign relations upon weak nations, warped its intelligence, and blithely deceived the public.

The movement conservatives' bullying, authoritarian spirit, benefiting from the party's built-in advantages, outlasted the bravado, corruption, and criminality of Richard Nixon's and Ronald Reagan's presidencies. And despite its internal tensions, the Republican apparatus is unlikely to crumble into oblivion. Very likely the fixtures of conservative life will outlast the careers of George W. Bush and Tom DeLay as well, for three reasons: the bulldozer mentality of Bush, Cheney, DeLay, and company was not invented by them; their adoring base persists in its will to believe; and the executive government that succeeds Bush, whether Democratic or Republican, is unlikely to be strong and clear-headed enough to pulverize the Bush coalition—to defeat it so thoroughly as to thwart its ability to linger at the edge of a comeback. So it is a matter of more than historical interest to take the full measure of the conservatives' (and therefore Republicans') tensile strength and the liberals' (and therefore Democrats') weakness. This is why understanding the rise of George W. Bush is no antiquarian pursuit, and neither is studying his approach to politics, his rejection of reason, and the nature of his base and its will to believe.

