

One can only solve the mystery of how George W. Bush became President - and inflicted so much damage - by taking into account the collaboration of Washington's political and media Establishments, notes Robert Parry.

After little more than two years of the Watergate scandal, Richard Nixon resigned and his successor, Gerald Ford, famously declared, "our long national nightmare is over." But the painful end game of Nixon's presidency was nothing compared to the eight excruciating years of George W. Bush.

Even on Inauguration Day 2009, as most Americans rejoice that Bush's disastrous presidency is finally heading into the history books, there should be reflection on how this catastrophe could have befallen the United States – and on who else was responsible.

Indeed, it may become one of the great historical mysteries, leaving future scholars to scratch their heads over how a leader with as few qualifications as George W. Bush came to lead the world's most powerful nation at the start of the 21st century.

How could a significant number of American voters have thought that an enterprise as vast and complicated as the US government could be guided by a person who had failed at nearly every job he ever had, whose principal qualification was that his father, George H.W. Bush, was fondly remembered as having greater personal morality than Bill Clinton?

Why did so many Americans think that a little-traveled, incurious and inarticulate man of privilege could lead the United States in a world of daunting challenges, shifting dangers and sharpening competition?

What had transformed American politics so much that, for many Americans, personal trivia, like Al Gore's earth-tone sweaters, trumped serious policy debates, like global warming, health care for citizens, prudent fiscal policies and a responsible foreign policy? How could George W. Bush, who was born with a shiny silver spoon in his mouth, sell himself as a populist everyman?

Even taking into account the controversial outcome of Election 2000 – which saw Gore win more votes than Bush – why was the margin close enough so Bush could snatch the White House away with the help of five Republicans on the US Supreme Court?

And why did the nation – after the 9/11 attacks – so willingly follow Bush into a radical divergence from traditional US foreign policy and into violations of longstanding national principles of inalienable rights and the rule of law?

Why did the institutions designed to protect US constitutional liberties, including the press and Congress, crumble so readily, allowing Bush to seize so much power that he could entangle the United States in an aggressive – and costly – war in Iraq with few questions asked?

Perceptions of Reality

Part of the answer to this historical mystery can be found in the complex relationship between the American people and mass media. The multi-billion-dollar stakes involved in selling commercial products to the world's richest market also made the American people the most analyzed population on earth.

Controlling their perceptions of reality and eliciting their emotions became more than just art forms; they were economic imperatives.

Just as Madison Avenue ad executives got rich selling products to American consumers, K Street political consultants earned tidy sums for using the false intimacy of TV to make their candidates appear more “down-to-earth” or “authentic” and their opponents seem “weird” or “dirty.”

By 2000, the Republicans also had pulled far ahead of the Democrats in the machinery of political messaging, both in the technological sophistication of the party apparatus and the emergence of an overtly conservative media that stretched from print forms of newspapers, magazines and books to electronic outlets of radio, TV and the Internet.

Nothing remotely as advanced existed on the liberal side of American political life. Conservatives liked to call the mainstream news media “liberal,” but in reality, its outlook was either corporate with a strong sympathy for many Republican positions or consciously “centrist” with a goal of positioning the news content somewhere in the “middle.”

In Campaign 2000, the Republican advantages in media guaranteed a rosier glow around George W. Bush's attributes and a harsher light on Al Gore's shortcomings. Many voters said they found Bush a more likeable fellow – “a regular guy” – while viewing Gore as a wonky know-it-all, who “thinks he's smarter than we are.”

That was, at least in part, a reflection of how the two candidates were presented by the dominant news media, from Fox News to The New York Times. [For details on this media imbalance, see our book, Neck Deep.]

The talented Republican image-makers portrayed Bush as a refreshing alternative to the endless parade of consultant-driven, poll-tested candidates – though, in reality, Bush's image was as consultant-driven and poll-tested as anybody's, down to his purchase of a 1,600-acre ranch in Crawford, Texas, in 1999, just before running for the White House.

Post 9/11

After the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington less than nine months into Bush's

presidency, the American people immediately invested their hopes in what the press portrayed as Bush's natural leadership skills. The Democrats also granted Bush extraordinary deference.

But that wasn't enough. Bush's political advisers and the right-wing media sensed the opportunity presented by the 9/11 crisis to strengthen their ideological hand. Karl Rove, for instance, saw the possibility of locking in permanent Republican control of the US government.

With the nation gripped by fear and jingoism, an enforced unity took hold. Bush declared a "war on terror" and oversaw a fundamental transformation of the US constitutional system, asserting the "plenary" – or unlimited – powers of Commander in Chief at a time of war, making him what his advisers called the "unitary executive."

But the "war on terror" was unique in American history because it knew no limits either in time or space. It was an endless conflict on a global battlefield, including the American homeland.

So, under Bush's post-9/11 presidential theories, he could ignore laws passed by Congress. He simply attached a "signing statement" declaring that he would not be bound by any restrictions on his authority. As for laws enacted before his presidency, those, too, could be cast aside if they infringed on his view of his own power.

Bush also could override constitutional provisions that protected the rights of citizens. He could deny the ancient right of habeas corpus which requires some due process for a person to be locked away by the government. All Bush had to do was designate someone an "enemy combatant."

He also could order warrantless searches and wiretaps, waiving the Fourth Amendment's requirement for court-approved search warrants based on "probable cause."

Bush even could authorize US interrogators to abuse and torture captives if he thought that would make them talk. He could order assassinations of anyone he deemed a "terrorist" or somehow linked to "terrorism." He could take the nation to war with or without congressional consent.

Former Vice President Gore asked in a 2006 speech: "Can it be true that any President really has such powers under our Constitution? If the answer is 'yes,' then under the theory by which these acts are committed, are there any acts that can on their face be prohibited?"

The answer to Gore's rhetorical question was clearly, "no," there were no boundaries for Bush's "plenary" powers. In the President's opinion, his powers were constrained only by his own judgment. Bush was "the decider."

End of Rights

Looking at Bush's arrogation of powers, the troubling conclusion was that the nation's treasured "unalienable rights," proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and enshrined in the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights, no longer applied, at least not as something guaranteed or

“unalienable.”

Under the Bush theories, the rights were optional. They belonged not to each American citizen as a birthright, but to George W. Bush as Commander in Chief who got to decide how those rights would be parceled out.

The only safeguard left for American citizens – and for people around the world – was Bush’s assurance that his extraordinary authority would be used to stop “bad guys” and to protect the homeland.

Patriotic Americans would not feel any change, he promised. They could still go to the shopping mall or to baseball games. Only those who were judged threats to the national security would find themselves in trouble. That list kept growing, however, to include terrorist “affiliates,” “any person” who aids a terrorist, and government “leakers” who divulged Bush’s secret decisions.

To comfort Americans who feared that Bush was accumulating powers more fitting a King than a President, Bush’s supporters cited previous examples of presidents suspending parts of the Constitution, as Abraham Lincoln did with habeas corpus during the Civil War and Franklin Delano Roosevelt did in incarcerating thousands of Japanese-Americans after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor at the start of American involvement in World War II.

But those conflicts were traditional wars, definable in length and with endings marked by surrenders or treaties. By contrast, the “war on terror” was a global struggle against a tactic – terrorism – that had been employed by armies and irregular forces throughout history.

Administration officials acknowledged that there would be no precise moment when the struggle would be won, no clear-cut surrender ceremony on the deck of a US aircraft carrier. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called the conflict the “long war,” but it could be dubbed the “endless war,” a struggle against elusive and ill-defined enemies.

At times, Bush expanded the scope of the conflict beyond defeating terrorism to eliminating “evil.”

Yet, since there was no reason to think the “war on terror” would ever end, a logical corollary was that the American political system – as redefined by Bush – had changed permanently.

If the war would last forever, so too would the “plenary” powers of the Commander in Chief. With the President’s emergency powers established as routine, the de facto suspension of American constitutional rights also would become permanent. The democratic Republic with its constitutional checks and balances – as envisioned by the Founders – would be no more.

Pushing Back

But the emergence of an imperial presidency did not occur without some resistance. Despite residual fears about another 9/11, many rank-and-file Americans, both liberals and traditional conservatives, grew uneasy over Bush’s power grab. Their voices, however, were rarely heard

in the major media, confined mostly to Internet sites and alternative radio outlets.

Then, in 2005, the administration's incompetence in handling Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans awakened more Americans to the emptiness of Bush's promises about protecting the homeland. With Bush's Iraq War also going badly, his approval rating sank below 50 percent on its way to the 20th percentiles.

In November 2006, American voters returned control of Congress to the opposition Democrats, and in November 2008, voters stripped the Republican Party of the White House, too.

Barack Obama's election represented a stunning repudiation of George W. Bush's radical concept of unlimited presidential power, but many of the factors that enabled Bush to get as far as he did remain in place to this day.

The major US news media, which either cheered Bush on or looked the other way, has changed little. Indeed, in the days before the Inauguration, President-elect Obama made a point of courting the favor of right-wing columnists, such as Bill Kristol and Charles Krauthammer, and of the mainstream press, like the Washington Post's editorial board.

Obama also has reassured the Washington Establishment that he doesn't intend to shake things up too much. He's kept on one of the insiders' favorites, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, and has appointed other officials to manage foreign and economic policy who have had a hand in many of the dubious decisions implemented by the Bush administration.

The incoming President also has been paying heed to Establishment voices urging him not to hold Bush and his subordinates accountable for the many crimes they committed. Don't listen to those American citizens who are demanding that the nation's laws be enforced against high-ranking officials, Obama is being counseled.

Yet, beyond the issue of accountability for lawbreaking, there is another even more daunting challenge, how to replace the political and media institutions that aided and abetted the Bush administration's assault on the nation's constitutional principles and on reason itself.

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