

AoW - George W. Bush's legacy

1. Demonstrate evidence of a close reading
2. Highlight your confusion.
3. Write a 1+ page reaction to the story in your WN. How did President Bush affect you?

A soldier, a teacher, a detainee, an AIDS worker and others reflect on how the president affected them.

The legacy of President George W. Bush will undoubtedly be debated by scholars and historians for many years to come. But as the president and his administration enter their final weeks in office, many of those who were most affected by the policies and politics of the last eight years are already beginning to look back in an effort to assess what they experienced. Here are some of their voices.

'Intestinal fortitude'

David Bellavia, a former Army staff sergeant who served in the 1st Infantry Division for six years, is the recipient of the Silver Star and the Bronze Star. He is the author of "House to House," a memoir of his war experiences.

As an American, I supported our president, and I supported the ideas behind the Iraq war. This was the war that I joined the military to fight, and when my commander in chief said "this is righteous and noble," I believed him.

That doesn't mean I've supported all of the president's policy decisions regarding this war. Most of the time, I didn't even know what decisions were being made. When you're on the ground, you're in a sort of cocoon. You don't have access to electronic media, and newspapers are 4 months old. One thing I do remember is President Bush's "bring 'em on" comment in July 2003. That sort of taunt was not what we wanted to hear. That was a message that appealed to people with no dirt under their fingernails. Right after that, I went out in the sector and there was a huge firefight. When I deployed, 250 Americans had died in Iraq. When I left, that number was 1,500. My unit alone lost 37 men.

It's going to be 50 years before anyone is able to soberly look at this administration. People who take shots at Bush are missing the complexity of his job and his fundamental ability to maintain the courage of his convictions. The "surge" was an apology for the previous tactical game on the ground in Iraq. Bush's willingness to admit that there was a huge problem while he was in charge, and then to take the steps necessary to adjudicate that problem, took a tremendous amount of intestinal fortitude.

'Time for change'

Maher Arar is a citizen of Canada. A federal appeals court in New York is currently considering whether or not his lawsuit against the U.S. government should be heard.

While changing planes at JFK Airport in New York on my way home to Canada from a vacation with my wife and children in 2002, I was pulled aside, detained and interrogated by the FBI. U.S. officials told me that, based on classified evidence I was not permitted to see, I had been found to be an Al Qaeda member and was being sent to Syria rather than home to Canada.

Two weeks later, despite my repeated assertions that I would be tortured if I was sent back to Syria, where I was born and hadn't been since I was a teenager, I was flown by private jet to Jordan, beaten and interrogated, and then delivered to Syria.

For more than 10 months, I was tortured and interrogated and held in a filthy, dark, underground grave-like cell that was 3 feet wide, 6 feet wide and 7 feet high. Syrian authorities ultimately stated publicly they had found no connections to terrorism and released me home to Canada. I am fortunate to still have my family, but otherwise my life as I knew it has been taken from me -- my work, my confidence, my trust.

The Canadian government conducted an exhaustive public inquiry that culminated in a public apology to me for my ordeal, something I never got from the Bush administration, which was responsible for my ordeal. So far, I have not even succeeded in having my lawsuit considered; it has been thrown out at the request of the U.S. government on grounds of national security.

Both the reputation and the future of America depend heavily on the choices that the American people make today. Do Americans really feel safer today than they did before the Bush administration came into office? Are Americans willing to sacrifice more of their sacred human and civil rights?

The reputation of the United States has suffered enough, and it is time for positive change, a change that can protect national security while safeguarding human dignity, human rights and civil liberties.

Frustration with FEMA

Father Vien The Nguyen is pastor at Mary Queen of Vietnam, a Catholic parish in New Orleans East whose community was devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

After Hurricane Katrina, our entire community was under water. We sat on the road in the hot sun for two days with very little food and water before someone finally came and got us. When we returned, we found that one of my elderly parishioners had died in her bed. The entire community was empty. The mold was taking over -- you wouldn't believe how awful the smell was. We had to act quickly. We didn't wait for government help -- if we had, we'd still be waiting.

Instead, we got in there and helped each other and started to rebuild right away. But many of our senior citizens were scattered and isolated.

One of our main frustrations was with FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency]. We worked out a deal with the agency under which we would provide the land and they would install trailers for our elderly parishioners. But because of the frequent rotation of FEMA personnel, the group that we negotiated with was not the same group that placed people in the trailer park.

We provided FEMA with a list of 300 parishioners who needed housing, but many of the applicants were elderly and had limited English skills. FEMA did not have a single staffer who spoke Vietnamese. Some of our seniors were disoriented and had memory loss. Many of them did not have documents that FEMA required, so they got passed over. FEMA began filling the trailers with people who had no connection to the community and no interest in living in this isolated part of the city. Eventually, we were able to get our seniors in there, but it took more than a year to sort that out. The federal support seems to be out there somewhere, but there isn't any coordination with the state and local level.

Provided leadership

Jean "Bill" Pape is a professor of medicine at Cornell University and the founder and director of the Haitian government's research and training center for HIV/AIDS.

When George Bush was elected president, we had some global funding, but it was clearly insufficient. We were only able to fund

antiretroviral drugs for 2,000 people, and the future looked pretty bleak. After a while, when you are fighting so hard against the odds, you start to burn out

The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which President Bush created, and the leadership he provided are unprecedented. There is no way we could have succeeded without this massive support.

Now we have treatment for about 19,000 people. Bush has done more to fight AIDS in the developing world than anyone else. About 80% of the HIV patients who are alive today in Haiti are alive because of this program. The same is probably true for most of Africa. Bush bridged the inequity that existed in caring for people with HIV.

The first time I met Bush, he said he would hold us accountable. I was impressed that somebody who was not a citizen of my country, who was a citizen of a country that was not nearly as affected by HIV as my own and other countries, would make this kind of commitment. He gave us the opportunity to put into action what we had dreamed of for so long.

'Shoot first, ask later'

John Kiriakou is a former CIA officer who participated in the capture and questioning of Abu Zubaydah, the first terrorist suspect to be waterboarded.

By Sept. 11, 2001, I had already served as a CIA officer for nearly 12 years. It was a typical day like any other. But, by the middle of the morning, I found myself volunteering, like hundreds of my colleagues, to go immediately to Afghanistan to fight Al Qaeda. Six months later, in Pakistan, I led a raid that captured Abu Zubaydah, then the most senior Al Qaeda terrorist ever captured.

He was in a white, middle-class house in the east-central Pakistani city of Faisalabad. As the leader of the team, my job was to identify the target, assemble the team (CIA, FBI and Pakistani security) and lead the assault on the house at 2 a.m. We were successful, and I returned home proud of myself, of the agency and of the country.

But in the following months, I learned that we were waterboarding Abu Zubaydah and two other prisoners we had captured. My first reaction was that it was the right thing to do. They had information that could save American lives, and I trusted my leadership when they said this was the only way to get it. But in retrospect, it was wrong. We had lost the moral high ground.

It was only years later that I learned that the "enhanced techniques" program was not something conceived by CIA officers desperate to protect the country but by political hacks and bureaucrats in the White House and the Justice Department. And worse, none of them wanted to take responsibility for what they had done.

I think it will be the legacy of the administration: Shoot first, ask questions later, and blame the other guy.

Dream realized

Jesse Miranda is co-director of the Hispanic Churches in American Public Life research project. He is founding and current president of the Alianza de Ministerios Evangélicos Nacionales (AMEN), a multid denominational association of Latino Protestant lay and clergy leaders.

Because of President Bush, the term "faith based" has entered the common vernacular. I was impressed that he sat down with me and other clergy even before his inauguration. By doing that, he signaled that faith-based initiatives would have a high priority.

I was also one of the 15 people he called in after 9/11 for prayer before he spoke to the nation.

The president's involvement went a long way toward soothing local concerns about religious groups. Before that, we had had a hard time getting a positive reception, but with the Bush imprimatur, that changed. Local agencies, city halls and civic groups felt reassured that the religious community was not going to overtake or in any way conflict with them.

There were some major successes: In Santa Ana, Templo Calvario really took off with the support of the Bush initiative. They have a wide range of community advocacy programs, including feeding, education and outreach. Nueva Esperanza in Philadelphia also benefited greatly. They have a charter school, a community college and laundromats. These are examples of realizing the dream of faith-based initiatives.

Unfortunately, there were many churches that did not achieve the same degree of success, and I think that was in large part because of a lack of sustained political will. But overall, communities of faith today are far more accepted as partners in community work than they were before Bush took office.

'Worse than I imagined'

Bill Wade is the former superintendent of Shenandoah National Park and chairman of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees.

Once George Bush took office, I started hearing rumors that plans were underway to strip the national parks of protections that had been in place since the early 20th century, but there was no way to substantiate the rumors. Then, one afternoon, I was at home and an e-mail arrived that contained a radical rewrite of the rule book for the entire park service.

My response was "Oh, my God!" It was hello snowmobiles, jet skis and Britney Spears concerts -- goodbye peace, clean air and preservation. I had no idea they were planning to change things so radically. It was far worse than I'd imagined. From that point forward, I spent every waking moment working to beat this thing down. I immediately began spreading the word. Ultimately, we got it reversed about 85%. The version that is now in practice came out in 2006. It's better than that document that appeared in my e-mail, but not as good as what we had before. In the larger scheme of things, that rewrite set the tone for the administration -- a tone for environmental degradation inside our national parks and beyond.

Not given resources

Katty Iriarte is the principal of Van Ness Avenue Elementary school. In the last four years, the school's Academic Performance Index has risen 90 points, to 800 out of a possible 1,000.

Because of No Child Left Behind, every teacher now has to be certified. That's been especially valuable at Van Ness because nearly half our students are English-language learners, and the certification process gives teachers very good techniques for working with language learners. I also welcome the law's emphasis on accountability. We can measure our achievements and ensure that we are working toward meeting a statewide baseline for our students.

However, with accountability there should be resources, and we were not given any. Just by telling people, "You will," doesn't necessarily make it happen.

What works for us is educational enrichment, pulling struggling kids out of class and focusing on their needs in groups of four or five or six. This is not part of the law, but I made it happen at my school by getting grants, squeezing every penny from the budget and by being creative with allocating my resources.