

PORTRAIT OF AN UNFIT PRESIDENT

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When considering George W. Bush, the most important fact to keep in mind is that he is not well-suited for his job. He is in the running to be the most destructive president in American history. Any rivals for that epithet (possibly James Buchanan, whose ineffectiveness during the slavery crisis in the late 1850s broke the country in two, and caused the carnage of the Civil War) were not most powerful men in the world. Also important to remember is that this momentous fact is not emotionally tolerable for the vast majority of Americans. Opinion polls frequently do not quite reflect what they claim, but if a New York Times/CBS News poll says that 67 percent of the pollees approved of George W. Bush's job performance, while 70 percent said he had strong qualities of leadership, this means something. In May 2003, many, perhaps most, Americans still believed that the simple good-vs-evil approach to world affairs fits American circumstances. To outsiders who have followed events since September 11, such trust in the president is only explicable by the fact that the American public suffers from a condition for which "misinformed" would be a euphemism.

To a European like myself much of the country appears to be in denial; comparable to a patient who refuses to accept the reality of medical tests that establish critical illness. If members of the Democratic Party, which is supposed to form the country's political opposition, have thoughts running in this direction, only few have voiced them in public. Under different circumstances, in normal times of partisan political rhetoric and electoral opinion, people would hardly think twice about portraying an adversary as incompetent when measured for qualities deemed necessary for holding high office. Such political criticism would normally be taken with a grain of salt. But with George W. Bush it cuts too close to the bone.

The United States is farthest advanced in the take-over of the media by the entertainment industry, and a display of presidential incompetence can only be made palatable within the safe and predictable conventions of late night comedy shows. Hence the program "Saturday Night Live" regularly broadcasts skits on the theme that Bush is a chimpanzee. But presidential incompetence shown in news programs would be too disquieting, and whatever is disquieting does not entertain.

Only an underground of political opinion, using the internet as its main public communication tool, have since the beginning of his rule elaborated on the subject of George W. Bush not being suited to the tasks he must perform. And only a few newspapers, aghast at schemes for the conquest of Iraq and creeping domestic police-state methods, were in early 2003 begin-

ning to portray these developments as America's plight brought on by an incompetent leader.

the unfit president

The reason that George W. Bush is not suited to his job is that he does not know enough. To the extent that one's language reveals the order of one's mind, his mind is a shambles. Being the president of the United States has come to mean being the most powerful man in the world. We all would expect that the person in that singular position possesses sufficient knowledge of the world, and sufficient curiosity, to allow him at least being serious and thoughtful about how his conduct affects hundreds of millions of people. There has been no evidence that George W. Bush possesses either.

Even while some of George W. Bush's predecessors may, like him, have lacked a sense of balance and proportion, one could normally, in situations requiring seriousness, detect a grasp of gravity when this was called for. There is much evidence in his televised appearances to conclude that in this regard Bush has remained stuck in an adolescent phase of personal development. A telling moment came when in an interview for *Talk Magazine* (August 1999) he ridiculed a woman whose plea for mercy while on Texas' death row he had ignored. This woman, Karla Faye Tucker, had become nationally known as she had aired her plea during a CNN interview. Bush is an enthusiastic supporter of the death penalty and convinced that all so sentenced deserve to die, but the decision to let someone die rather than commute the sentence would still seem to require a demeanor of solemn seriousness. Instead of rising to that level, when asked to recount the episode, Bush mocked Tucker as he pinched his face into a parody of tearful fear and whimpered "Please...don't kill me."

Another chilling glimpse of Bush's apparent inability to fathom the momentousness of his own acts was inadvertently shown on TV in several countries as the BBC aired coverage of preparations, live from the satellite feed coming from the Oval Office of the White House, before his speech on March 17, 2003 declaring his intention to invade Iraq. George W. Bush was getting his hair combed, as he sat at his desk looking at his text, the contents of which announced the de-facto re-ordering of strategic reality. At an unguarded moment he started making funny faces at his handlers, eyes darting back and forth, and he pumped a fist, uttering "feel good". When he challenges Iraqi opposition to the American occupation with what amounts to an invitation to attack American troops with his now notorious "bring them on" phrase, one is made to wonder whether this president has any idea at all of what he has brought upon himself, his country and the world.

Needless to say, some of what I have said in the above is likely to make some Americans angry. Many have sensed some of what I have summed up

here as they watched their president on TV. But bringing themselves to believe what their intuition tells them, and turn their discomfort into careful thought, is difficult. Many cannot afford to do so. Not only because of what their immediate neighbors may think, or because of their desire never to be thought of as unpatriotic, but also for personal psychological reasons; for the sake of their self-preservation as citizens of what they must continue to believe is a democracy. After all, George W. Bush has not been bestowed upon the American population in the way that in earlier epochs, in pre-democratic parts of the world, a populace quaking with fear would have to put up with a new monarch, perhaps the mad or wastrel son of a dead king. He has not, officially at least, inherited the office.

There has not been an American president who was as scarcely literate as the present most powerful man in the world. Some earlier presidents, like Andrew Jackson, were accused of illiteracy, but upon closer examination they were models of expressiveness when compared to George W. Bush. Eisenhower, an extremely shrewd and accomplished president, was sometimes criticized for a similar kind of verbal chaos as produced by Bush. But it was immediately clear that underneath this was thoughtfulness and responsibility. I am not talking here of the all-too-common phenomenon of a politician making grammatical mistakes, or getting the meaning of some words mixed up. The pressure cooker atmosphere of the media-circus politics of our times, with its ubiquitous TV cameras and microphones, have made those slips byproducts of everyday political life. I am talking about an inability to stay coherent after even a couple of unscripted sentences. George W. Bush is incoherent much of the time when he is forced to emerge even a little above the stratum of utter platitudes. Many of his sentences do not mean anything at all. Some apparently say the opposite of what he in all likelihood meant to say.

George Bush the first, president from 1989 till 1993, was notorious for his linguistic inabilities and the dearth of meaning in his pronouncements. But Bush the second is a great deal worse. I am not talking here about intelligence per se. A friend – whom I consider one of the most knowledgeable analysts of American politics – reminds me that "our historians have never been able to establish a clear correlation between intelligence and proficiency as president". True, but there are other qualities of the mind toward which George W. Bush continues to demonstrate an easily perceived indifference. Strikingly absent is curiosity, and being open to the possibility that your "gut instincts" may mislead you. Bush's language reveals a sloppiness about distinctions, connections and nuance, and lack all subtlety. Then there is the black/white nature of his views, the "with us or against us" approach. For his supporters this is a plus, they see steadfastness on behalf of American interests; but for those with a more cosmopolitan perspective it places the president of the United States sadly outside the realm of diplomacy.

Even more disturbing: none of what I have said here was ever a deep secret. George W. Bush's illiteracy and incoherence, his lack of diplomatic and communication skills has been plain for all to see. It has been right in front of us on TV screens, throughout his presidential election campaign and ever since. It is openly acknowledged that he is an "intensely scripted" president; most of the words you hear him say being put in his mouth by other people. Even then, his handlers are happy when he gets through a statement or a short speech, read from a teleprompter, without stumbling. Initially American newspapers gave the story away in their dead-pan reporting on whether or not it came from the heart when Bush said this, that or the other, or whether it was prepared by his coaches. When after September 11 he cried on screen on one occasion, I read in at least half a dozen places that "his tears were real".

The Europeans in whose midst I lived for much of the presidential election campaign period, and in the months following the September 11 attacks, almost unanimously commented on the eeriness of watching the current American president address any weighty issue at all. There is no reason to believe that Europeans have been born with superior abilities to diagnose the qualities of politicians. Bush's ineptitude as displayed on TV screens must have been as evident for Americans. The difference has been that Europeans have been spared much of the propaganda that has accompanied the TV images, telling Americans to disbelieve what they kept seeing. The United States' broadcast media have persistently offered commentary that is dissonant with what the viewer's eye and mind perceive in the screen images of the president. Implicitly, if not openly through positive comments, American TV has contradicted what common sense would dictate. This has to do with the sway that the American Right has gained over broadcast media. But it has also probably been the result of a widespread feeling among commentators and those who "bring the news" that, as everyone already knows of Bush's awkwardness with the English language, it would be unseemly to rub it in any further.

compensating propaganda

In the lifetime of most of us there has probably not been an instance of propaganda as effective as that which was successful in eradicating doubts about George W. Bush's competence from American TV viewers' minds. For comparable effectiveness in directing the political thinking of an entire nation we must go back to Germany or Japan in the early part of World War II, or to newly communist countries before unfulfilled promises and political suppression could create widespread doubt. Some significant national doubt was beginning to gather around the presidency of George W. Bush when it was eight months old. But in the aftermath of the terrorist massacres it was pushed back and out of the national consciousness.

The attacks were a godsend to the floundering Bush administration. There was no question that in living memory there had been no president less respected when he was sworn in. The thought that he was not elected, but appointed to the presidency by a partisan Supreme Court was still very much alive in the minds of numerous Americans before September 11. But in its hour of sudden vulnerability, in its fear of an alien force hiding unseen within its own towns, the American nation required a steadfast and competent president. And the vulnerable American imagination was prepared to believe that one had just been created.

It required a considerable amount of compensating propaganda. A positive picture of the president had to be constructed in a great hurry because of the initial impression, on the day of the terrorist attacks, of his lacking in courage. On that day of America's greatest shock since the attack on Pearl Harbor, the president appeared to have vanished as he zigzagged through the country between Air Force bunkers, first in Louisiana, then in Nebraska, before returning to the White House at 7 pm. It was New York's mayor Rudy Giuliani who served as an emotional anchor for the American public in the immediate aftermath. To explain Bush's absence when the country needed to hear and see him, a lie was concocted that the secret service and his advisers had specific evidence that he and the presidential jet plane had been terrorist targets.

For days following the destruction of the World Trade Towers and part of the Pentagon, when most people could not concentrate on other subjects and found it difficult to stay away from TV screens, one major question was discussed only in closed circles: can the president cope with this? Never asked explicitly on the screens, it was foremost in the heads of millions. When in the evening of September 11, George W. Bush finally showed his face on those screens he gave the impression of being confused and frightened. He used trite expressions that were not in keeping with the gravity of the situation, could not build his sentences coherently or intone them with a sense of genuine conviction, and sometimes gave the impression that he did not fully understand the words he used. The turning point came with a gracefully written speech to a Joint Session of Congress on September 20, which gave the impression that he had understood what had happened. But it still took a massive propaganda effort, which dovetailed with the wishful thinking of the American people, to reverse the first damaging impression of the president as a scared rabbit.

the mysterious metamorphosis

A major theme dominating American media for months after September 11 was that of George W. Bush "growing in his job". Typical were the comments of the executive editor of the conservative Weekly Standard, Fred Barnes, who announced Bush's "emergence as a full-blown war president".

A few honest journalists have remarked that it is impossible to know how Mr. Bush has really changed, because the White House has been extraordinarily adamant in controlling what officials or friends say about him. They had to discover that most of those who are in a position to know what the president feels or thinks keep it to themselves. But before long, as far as the mainstream media were concerned, George W. Bush had mastered foreign policy.

Something mystical had happened to the person without critical skills, without intellectual curiosity, and with only a dim grasp of the world beyond the realm of rich America, which he had never looked at from the outside. After his post-September 11 speech to Congress, the president began to be compared to Winston Churchill, to Franklin D. Roosevelt, and to Abraham Lincoln. After his much commented upon Axis of Evil speech, one commentator even ranked him above Julius Caesar. Much of that came from the American Right propaganda mills, but these superlatives, spilling over into the mainstream media, were a give-away that something quite outrageous was going on. None of the presidents since Lyndon Johnson -- who risked his own political position to achieve goals benefiting the public -- could ever be compared to the statesmen that were invoked, and Bush represents an absolute low when measured against these immediate predecessors. The media comparisons with the truly great presidents simply bring out what a dismal imitation of such presidents he is.

Much of this praise was a result of commentators who believed a metamorphosis of their president to be a minimum requirement for the nation to digest the reality of the terrorist massacre. The great new threat to the country required a leader with more than average talents, and one with no talents at all was intolerable to the minds of most media people. When reality becomes intolerable there comes a moment when critical thought must be suspended. Once that tricky moment has passed, self-deceit becomes extraordinarily effective and contagious. American self-deceit became even deeper and more widespread after the Taliban regime had been ejected from Afghanistan, accompanied by the illusion that Bush had performed brilliantly as commander in chief. As rightist columnists were asking, if you like the war Bush has fought, how can you continue to insist he's stupid? On television Bush had become a great hero. And once that was the official reality, commentary turned into hero-worship. Bush was a brilliant player on the world scene, and a master of political insight, according to the manufactured reality offered by the United States' mainstream media.

Self-deceit does not offer guarantees against creeping doubts, and gradually while George W. Bush demonstrated in April 2002 that he held no diplomatic control over Israel's Ariel Sharon; while he managed to turn a powerful global wave of sympathy for the United States into a powerful wave of protest; and as his administration's unsuccessful maneuvering centered on the UN Security Council in March 2003 was America's loss, more and more

media self-deceit has been needed to keep the mystique of the decisive leader going.

In the way that media and politically powerful Americans teamed up in late 2001 to condemn questioning of George W. Bush's way with the world, the political system became somewhat reminiscent of a fascist leader cult. Polls that are supposed to test the popularity of the president by asking the public whether he is doing a good job, are taken as proof that he is truly an effective commander and on the right track. High popularity figures bestow an extraordinary quality on the president in a similar manner to how multi-billionaires acquire extraordinary status simply from the fact that they possess astronomical amounts of money. To be sure, an unknown but seemingly increasing number of Americans are expressing concern that the actual policies of the George W. Bush administration, especially those of attorney-general John Ashcroft with his "homeland security" cult, are reminiscent of fascistic government.

good, evil, and Bush's God

How does Bush, the man who was protected by his parents and their friends against harsh experiences in life, fare under all this? We get a pretty good idea through his pronouncements. George W. Bush, like all of us, requires a set of notions implanted in his brain, always ready to be called upon to cope with new information about developments around him. But in contrast to people who are curious about the world, these notions in George W. Bush's brain are not very subtle. They must be stark, unrelenting, hard, not leaving room for doubt. They are there, in Bush's case, to prevent him from being less than fully sure of things. That assessment of simplistic assumptions with which the American president does his thinking is inescapable when we look at how he explains his view on world affairs to his associates as well as his enemies.

The world, as far as he is concerned, is divided into two parts. One part is good and the other evil. It is black and white. Grey shades can be ignored. What follows from such an approach, Bush made clear to all governments in the world after he had announced that he was going to fight the evil part: You can be "either for us or against us". At first, this may have struck many people as a predictable way of exaggerating a point to get people's attention and to make a strong impression of resolve. Politicians do that all the time. But when you have listened continually to the statements of George W. Bush, it is no longer plausible to put it down to political rhetoric that need not be taken all that seriously. He means it. As far as he is concerned, evil is something within his capacity to reduce or eliminate.

A rational head of government would not presume that he could meddle with the world on that fundamental a level. But George W. Bush apparently brought himself to believe that he has been given the task of doing battle

against, and conquering, the "evil ones". Bush does not distinguish between "terrorism" and "evil". The words are interchangeable for him. In other words, terrorism is not in the end a political problem that must be dealt with in a politically judicious manner. Terrorism equals evil and can therefore only be approached with the aim to eradicate it. Two days after the September 11 massacre, he uttered a telling because unprepared line: "Americans do not yet have the distance of history but our responsibility to history is already clear - to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil". In other words, he has set himself a task comparable to tasks adopted by founders of religions.

Several reports have spoken of Bush's own wholly transformed sense of himself and his presidency, believing that "he has come face to face with his life's mission, the task by which he will be defined and judged." A Democratic senator of New York, Charles Schumer, who met with the president repeatedly after September 11 told a reporter that "He has told me several times that he is staking his entire presidency on this -- that the mark of whether he's successful is whether he can succeed in his goal of wiping out terrorism." It would be difficult to consistently give people around you -- assistants, friends and opponents -- the impression that you genuinely believe such a thing unless you actually do.

The next question, much debated in the United States as the invasion of Iraq was drawing closer, is whether George W. Bush sees his mission as one handed to him by God. Stories about this, many of which have a propagandistic origin, go two ways. For those sober-minded people who find such superstition disturbing, there is the reassurance from a sympathetic Bush watcher "I've searched for a Bush declaration, explicit or implicit, that his policies come from God. I haven't found one." Yet the same author, the managing editor of the Republican Right magazine *The Weekly Standard*, describes approvingly a scene shortly after September 11 in the Oval Office with a Catholic cardinal, a Sikh, an imam, a rabbi, and two evangelical Protestants praying together with Bush, after which the president agreed with James Merritt, the head of the Southern Baptist Convention, who averred that God had chosen Bush to lead the United States in a fight to protect the world against terrorism. "I believe you are God's man for this hour," Merritt said. "God's hand is on you". George W. Bush's belief in his closeness to God has been widely reported with encouragement from his entourage, especially at a time when this helped contradict the impression of the president being a warmonger.

American TV culture was an indispensable element in George W. Bush's rise to the presidency. But without another very powerful political force he would never have made it. This force, the Christian Right, was hardly significant until the late 1970s but together with a couple of other allied movements it has radically altered the American political landscape since then. As some political thinkers in the United States have noted, the islamic funda-

mentalism that nourishes some terrorist groups has its unacknowledged counterpart in a peculiar American brand of protestant evangelism.

George W. Bush discovered their power when helping with his father's election campaign. It was around that time that he decided to become a "born again" Christian. An alcoholic, he announced that he had had a change of heart, would forego his drinking, and adopt the Lord Jesus as his guide for the rest of his life. This happened, supposedly, through the example of the "gentle and loving demeanor" of Billy Graham during a Bush family gathering in 1985. This preacher/operator long ago managed to turn himself into a national celebrity through skilfull showmanship and opportunism, and is supposed to lend moral authority to United States presidents when they are in trouble. Another preacher/operator, Tony Evans, the head of a church in Dallas, Texas, and one of the founders of the Promise Keepers movement, is believed to have been a more important influence. This movement is mixed up with Dominionism, a belief in the end of times with 'people of God' seizing earthly power so as to help rescue the world. Bush's friendship with Evans would seem to fit in with the theory of the current American president as God's instrument on earth.

The newly active American fundamentalist Christianity must not be confused with more traditional protestantism. It takes the form of loosely organized sects that appeal to the proliferating lost souls in a materialist and insecure society. Anguish about a vaguely defined moral decline, the sexual liberation of the 1960s, abortion and the social acceptance of open homosexuality, has created a large segment of the population susceptible to religious teachers who sell a puritan brand of Christianity emphasizing control of individual passions. They blame the misfortune and loss of control, which many Americans have undergone because of economic developments, on individual weakness in the face of temptation.

From what we can gather, George W. Bush has come to believe in some of their tenets and is passionate about the one thing concerning which born-again Christians are supposed to be passionate -- their newly found or rediscovered faith. Jesus, he says, has been the "philosopher" who influenced him most. When he had the opportunity, in Beijing, to address, over TV, the largest number of Chinese who ever listened to a Westerner directly, he told them that progress could only come if they converted to Christianity. At the G8 summit held in Canada in June 2002, Bush opened a press conference with Russian president Vladimir Putin by saying, "We need common sense judges who understand that our rights were derived from God and those are the kind of judges I intend to put on the bench." During a radio talk around Easter time 2002, he averred that "history is of a moral design" and that "justice and cruelty have always been at war, and God is not neutral between them. His purposes are often defied but never defeated".

missed greatness

The metamorphosis attributed to George W. Bush after September 11, the metamorphosis into a great president, one that the country needed in its hour of horror and vulnerability, is a hoax. He squandered the opportunity offered him on a silver platter to become known as a president who actually improved the world -- hence, a great president. The opportunity came in the form of an approval rating that his most popular predecessors could only have dreamed of. This sudden popularity resulted from the psychological need of the American populace to have their threatened nation personified in a leader, but these origins do not detract from the implied message: you do what you think best for the country, we will be behind you!

American presidents, like prime ministers in most democracies, usually have their hands tied. They may have great visions for improving society, but they are hemmed in by hundreds of special interests, by powerful opponents waiting for an opportunity to trip them up on a detail of policy, and by an inability to forge unified intent for a good cause. George W. Bush was in a position, for perhaps a year, to overcome these obstacles. He could have gathered a braintrust around him, with the aim to design domestic and international programs for social, medical, educational, and infrastructural improvements that have remained dreams for other presidents. Who would have stood in his way? Not the Democrats, for sure, who rallied around him as if he were a genuine war president deserving of more bipartisan support than even Franklin Roosevelt could count on in World War II. Not the newspapers and TV, which accept White House propaganda uncritically.

All of this could have been made part of a campaign against the long-term causes of terrorism; to "drain the morass where mosquitos breed", as some writers put it. Any American effort to create a safer world requires cooperation from others. The more cooperation the better. An international effort fighting tuberculosis, malaria, AIDS, illiteracy, and conditions producing poverty would have added further international goodwill toward the United States in spades. Measures at home would all have contributed to a national atmosphere of pride and unity. Pension protection, better health care coverage, environmental measures, more and better trained and better rewarded teachers, programs for renovating impoverished neighborhoods and a host of improvements in the country's crumbling infrastructure, they were all within George W. Bush's reach. He could have become a great president by such acts with relative ease. But it was not in him to take the opportunity. There has been no metamorphosis.

George W. Bush and his entourage are not in the business of national improvement. They are by most accounts self-absorbed, self-serving, self-righteous individuals. Even a superficial look at their records will tell you that they do what they do for themselves and not for the public good. Tracing their business careers makes you wonder whether the notion of "public good" can have much meaning for them. The policy objective that did re-

ceive full presidential attention was a highly controversial tax cut almost exclusively benefiting the richest segment of the population.

The George W. Bush White House has remained opaque to American citizens. Very little of what goes on in cabinet meetings and among surrounding policy makers is known to the public. This administration is more secretive than any that specialists can remember. What does emerge from fawning books is not very reliable because of their propagandistic intent. But there has been a brief but revealing glimpse of the inside of the Bush government, when the first chief of the project for religious involvement in social spending, John DiIulio, quit after six months, and explained his reasons for doing so to a correspondent of Esquire Magazine. [note] The picture that emerges from DiIulio's account is of an administration obsessed with politics and reelection. "Politics" in this American meaning of the term does not have any bearing on the art of government, but is restricted to tactics and "dirty tricks" with the aim of gaining and keeping the advantage over opposition politicians.

When George W. Bush appointed historian and University of Pennsylvania professor DiIulio to head his new initiative, he had high hopes for him as contributing to the brain power of his administration. But "one of the most influential social entrepreneurs in America" -- as Bush himself characterised DiIulio -- concluded that "There is no precedent in any modern White House for what is going on in this one: a complete lack of a policy apparatus..." DiIulio could think of only a couple of White House staffers who concerned themselves with actual policy substance and analysis. Among the many staff discussions he had heard, there were "not three meaningful, substantive policy discussions". "[O]n social policy and related issues, the lack of even basic policy knowledge, and the only casual interest in knowing more, was somewhat breathtaking". Under heavy fire from the Bush entourage, DiIulio was forced to make a public retraction, but that, if anything, enhanced his credibility; here was a solid Republican who considered himself still a strong supporter of George W. Bush, and his revelation came more in sorrow than in anger.

"Everything—and I mean everything" according to this informant is "being run by the political arm". This last reference is to Karl Rove, who has frequently been referred to -- only half jokingly -- as George W. Bush's boss. Rove designed the campaign, complete with a "deluge of misinformation", that brought Bush to the presidency. At the center of the political operation -- meaning the strategy department -- he is a master in techniques and tricks for keeping the Democrats off-balance, and keeping the American press confused about much, except the fact that the Bush presidency is invincible. Colleagues and enemies alike consider him a wizard in sensing where public opinion may be going, and for steering it, so as to correct its course.

While Rove makes sure that no awkward questions linger around the homefront, aided by the short memories of public and media people, the reclu-

sive Dick Cheney has, ever since September 11, been engaged in steering foreign policy straight toward the long-planned invasion of Iraq, which has been sold to the public as an unpleasant but necessary move to protect the nation from more terrorism. These two activities must substitute for effective governance, and hide the unpalatable fact that the George W. Bush administration is not competent. Notwithstanding its secrecy, the George W. Bush administration has by now made a name for itself among layers of career officials, and also among Republican sympathizers, for irresponsibly ignoring problems that it does not "feel like dealing with right now."

In recent decades, an American president, and the question as to whether he is worth re-electing has been judged to a large extent by the state of the nation's economy. Or at least this is what the majority of commentators have decided as the crucial determinant, which then attains the familiar force of a self-fulfilling prediction. Under normal circumstances the actual effect of presidential economic management tends to be marginal. But there are such things as systemic neglect and business uncertainty caused by feeble policies, which may add up to a situation properly identified as mismanagement. According to one knowledgeable critic, the American economy under George W. Bush has experienced the worst performance "of any newly inaugurated president since Herbert Hoover". It lost 2 million jobs since January 2001. The \$1.35 trillion tax cut of 2001, supposedly implemented to stimulate demand, has had no effect. The stock market had by the summer of 2002 lost \$6.65 trillion in value since Bush took office, and the federal budget has gone from a projected surplus to a huge deficit that will haunt many administrations to come.

the manichean antidote to complexity

When George W. Bush spoke to the world on TV on March 17 to announce that he would go ahead with the invasion of Iraq, he reiterated reasons that any person taking the trouble to check them out could know to be fallacious. Iraq under Saddam Hussein did not pose the greatest threat to the United States or to "peace". It did not "continue to possess and conceal some of the most lethal" [meaning nuclear] weapons ever devised, and it had not trained operatives of al Qaeda. By a far stretch of the imagination Saddam could perhaps have supplied terrorists with chemical and biological weapons, but he knew that to do so would be to commit suicide. The assertion that "one day" Saddam Hussein could supply terrorists with nuclear weapons was preposterous. Saying that to wait any longer to overthrow him would be "suicide", equally so. There was more in the speech that does not stand up to scrutiny. The terrorist threat to America and the world would not be diminished the moment that Saddam Hussein was disarmed. As American officials themselves conceded with their alerts, the invasion was likely to increase that threat. The governments represented on the United

Nations Security Council did not "share our assessment of the danger", and America did not try "to work with the United Nations to address this threat", it did not want "to resolve the issue peacefully".

I imagine that many viewers with me, at some point pondered the crucial question whether this president has brought himself to believe what he tells the world. One need not be a psychologist to be familiar with such a trick of the psyche. Trying to figure out what goes on in the mind of the most powerful man in the world is a perfectly legitimate pursuit; arguments that this is unseemly or disrespectful ought to be rejected out of hand. We do not know enough about George W. Bush, and White House secrecy leaves us guessing at the precise process behind his making one of the most momentous decisions that any president has ever made. But we do have quite a lot to go on.

To place what we can know in perspective, we would do well to remind ourselves of the broader setting within which the current American administration must operate. George W. Bush has from the very beginning had to deal with a world more chaotic and more varied in its complexity than have any of his predecessors since World War II. This has not been an enviable situation. As the presidential entourage set out to fashion its stance toward the outside, its rule of thumb was to do things, wherever possible, in precisely the opposite way from how the Clinton administration had dealt with them (except in the matter of making the world safe for American business). This became clear in its handling of Israel/Palestinian conflict, its closing the door on North Korea, its early responses to China as the potential new enemy, and -- indeed -- its relegating of the potential Al Qaeda threat, which the Clinton administration had focused on, to a status of marginal importance.

A large part of growing up consists of learning how to deal with complexity. While complexity in literature or music may be a feast for brain and emotions, complexity in social situations and, even more, in the political realm can cause great discomfort, as it introduces doubt and challenges our ability to cope with our environment. A reality that contained the horrors of Hitler and Stalin was reassuringly simple in one respect: It defined an immediate threat to political civilization, and as such a solid base of political certainty upon which to formulate action and opinion. Throughout the Cold War period there was something to hang on to for curbing political doubt. A satisfying substitute for the Soviet Union as plain all-round counter example of what Europeans and Americans (should) believe in has not been found. But the George W. Bush administration faked one. Saddam Hussein, a horror to Iraqis, was not a threat to Western civilization or even his neighbors, but there has been psychological profit in portraying him as such.

In the face of the complexity of a world essentially at peace, with villains mostly encaged by the borders of their own countries, George W. Bush was aided by a group of intellectuals who had much earlier agreed that there did exist a continuing "clear and present danger" to the United States, and by ex-

tension Western civilization. This group has imagined an array of threats from which to choose, including putative threats to Israel, and has spent years formulating audacious strategies for the United States to establish unchallenged control over them. But perhaps the most valuable service this group, the neocons, has rendered George W. Bush is the elimination of complexity from the world in which he is the most powerful man.

The neocon recipe for dealing with the world is to act as if it were not complex, as if there is, as they term it, a clear and present danger; a successor danger to Soviet communism. The supporters they have gained, the cheering section of the American Right, the pundits paid by wealthy Republicans, have seduced a large segment of the American public to accept a corollary of this recipe: that steadfastness in the face of this supposed danger will make the world's complexity go away, as if scared of American military might. And while Karl Rove has been papering over domestic complexities, international complexity has been swept away by something that after September 11 came to be known as "moral clarity".

The neocon language has made a perfect fit with George W. Bush's notion of evil. He relishes speaking about it, and about the need to eradicate it.

The imagery of a titanic struggle between good and evil is known as "manichaeism", named after a Persian religious movement that started in the 3rd century AD and spread to parts of the Roman Empire. The founder of that movement, named Mani, believed himself to be the final prophet in a line that included Adam, as well as Buddha, Zoroaster and Jesus. He wanted to integrate what he believed to be truths from different religions in such a way that they could be translated and formulated in various forms to serve different cultures. Mani's movement taught that the true self of human beings shared in the nature of God, but humans were corrupted by the deeply evil nature of the world in which they live. From a past in which opposing substances -- spirit and matter, light and dark, good and evil -- were separated, we move through a present in which they are mixed toward a future in which they will be separated again. Believing oneself to be literally engaged in battles to eliminate evil from among the good is known as a Manichaean fantasy. This fantasy apparently inspires the most powerful man in the world.

Another term associated with the habit of thinking about the world in terms of black and white, good and evil, utterly right and utterly wrong, is "paranoia", used both for clinical purposes by psychologists and in more general parlance to describe those who believe that the world is full of hostile elements plotting against them. Ideas of persecution in the paranoid personality tend to go together with delusions of grandeur. The two mental states are well-known sides of the same coin. Sufferers of this mental affliction take themselves to be pure and morally superior and see others who disagree with them as immoral, corrupted and, indeed, evil. A perceptive American historian, Richard Hofstadter, analysed convincingly what he saw

as a broad national affliction, in "the paranoid style of American politics". The fantasy of eradicating evil from the world, and the notion that God is on his side in such a mission would certainly qualify as symptoms of delusions of grandeur on Bush's part. He likes to be compared to Churchill, and in the early aftermath of September 11 asked to be briefed about how that great British statesman conducted himself when Hitler began World War II. As for the delusion of being surrounded by hostile characters, it rather naturally takes up residence within people who are not competent to fulfill their jobs. Foreign heads of government and their advisers have found it difficult to take Bush seriously as a political thinker, and he has been treated as a joke within their salons. This cannot have escaped him.

the problem with evil

Manichaeism and paranoia have worked well for Bush after September 11. Many Americans are psychologically comforted by an absolutist moral stance. The term "moral clarity" resonates beyond the circles of supporters of the good-vs-evil approach to foreign policy. As influential commentators, editors and other public intellectuals keep using it, the term has become a slogan, a quick reference in commentary to indicate that the commentator is on the 'right side'. Ruling out nuance and complexity, "moral clarity" has also been widely used by neocon editors inveighing against the possibility that the president might defect from his manichean mission.

The problem with the manichean mindset is that it can only reach judgments through one criterion, which is the notion of evil. And because evil is, except for its blatant manifestations, extraordinarily hard to recognize and define in most cases, it is inappropriate for day-to-day use as a practical political concept. The term "evil" may serve well in political discourse only for extreme instances of badness, for extraordinary abuses of power. The top officials of the Khmer Rouge who systematically eradicated Cambodians who were known to use their brains (recognizable by their wearing spectacles, for example) and who destroyed an existing society down to its roots were recent examples of unmitigated evil. I would label Saddam Hussein evil as well, along with the North Korean regime, on the basis of their systematic murder, their indifference to the starvation and death and terror for which they are responsible. The murder of six, seven million Jews, homosexuals, gypsies and political opponents by Nazi Germany or Stalin's massacres can only be categorized as evil.

Talking about evil in the way that has become a habit for George W. Bush diminishes its momentousness. The resulting ubiquitous references to it in the media has already deprived the term of its horrifying connotations. This means that the American president and the commentators who support his manichean approach have now made it more difficult to identify true evil. Perhaps one reason why it was so easy for George W. Bush to use the

term lightly is that the American public has hardly known it as a serious political concept. It was long ago banished from the discourse that American "political science" has bestowed upon the world, because it was believed to be a pejorative term, heavy with "unscientific" value judgment. As this case demonstrates, if you throw out an unwanted presence through the door, it may come back through the window and be out of control.

The talk of "eradicating evil" and of "moral clarity" has deepened the murk, preventing proper interpretation of global affairs. What is now known as the "Bush Doctrine" of American foreign policy holds that enemies are defined not only by their readiness to commit terrorist acts, but also by accepting potential attackers in their midst. In other words, those who fail to resist the agents of evil are evil themselves. Such an approach fails in the face of political reality. It fails to allow for probably the majority of people who tolerate terrorists in their midst and who do so out of fear. Palestinian teenagers who throw themselves with bombs taped to their bodies into an Israeli eatery are not evil, but deluded, seduced by evil, filled with belief that there is no better way for them to do good. The onlookers who have not stopped such a tragically deluded teenager are not necessarily evil at all; they are most likely very scared, having been intimidated by strong forces around them much of their adult lives. It is palpably untrue to say that "those who are not with us are against us". Most people in the situations at hand have no choice.

the folksy Dubya

A potent American image is that of the common man or woman who does not use fancy language, who may be blunt and a bit awkward, who seems simple, but who is straight and therefore can be trusted. It fits with the streak of anti-intellectualism in the culture of the United States. It fits with the command that one should not make elitist judgments, which many American intellectuals also obey. Ordinary folk are associated with hard work and honesty. People who use words outside the vocabulary of daily conversation, and who pronounce these words in a carefully correct manner with an accent that suggests they have been highly educated, are suspect. They might trick you. George W. Bush has been packaged by his political handlers to look like the simple fellow who is morally sound and who won't tell lies, unlike some other politicians – Bill Clinton, for example. The most powerful man in the world is like "the man next door", less remote than the elite politicians of Europe. This imagery dovetails with the great illusion among Americans that their society knows no classes.

Of course many politicians and other figures who are in the public eye adopt a character as if they are actors on a stage. They sometimes grow into that personality and the public knows no other. The stage-Bush is known as "Dubya". The nickname is derived from his middle initial, with which he can

be distinguished from his father, president George H. W. Bush, and implied a jovial, ordinary, regular guy, who likes plain speech instead of fancy scholarly talk. Dubya is a likeable chummy character, and purposely a bit dimwitted, with the idea that this is a good thing as it makes him one of the people. The Dubya character was created when he ran for governor of Texas. As with all poor actors, George W. Bush frequently spoils his show by overacting the character he has adopted for public purposes. There are instances where he has conversed with other world leaders using phrases lifted from Western movies. And he wears his ignorance with defiant pride. Sometimes his true intemperate personality shines through as he appears to forget the purpose of the speech or the message at press conferences that he may be giving and just appears to be an angry spoiled-boy character who is not comfortable with himself.

Still, the common-man packaging of the American president helped in the early stage of his presidency to lessen the unease among the public which had been prompted by his struggles with the English language and his frequent embarrassingly inappropriate comments. Thanks to this successful fakery Bush can say and do things that would undermine the credibility of other highly placed politicians. When visiting Japan he used the word "devaluation" instead of "deflation" in remarks about what Japan should be doing about its economy, a linguistic confusion that on Feb 18 2002 caused a sudden dip in the value of the yen on exchange markets.

The media have been extraordinarily forgiving, as they filter Bush's actions and speech in such a way that the common-man image of the Dubya character may prevail. The American Right never tires of contrasting its president with the unreliable elitist and immoral Bill Clinton. The fact that George W. Bush was born rich and went to expensive schools is an easily overlooked complication, as is his reputation for laziness in more discerning circles. The fact that Clinton came from a poor background and never knew his real father and – very much unlike Bush – worked hard to elevate himself socially, is another forgotten fact. Clinton did not have a father who was director of the CIA, an ambassador, vice president and president. According to one biographer, he was the "Family Hero," looking after his mother and siblings, fighting his stepfather who beat his mother and creating a reputation of family uprightness for the outside world. Clinton earned his way into Georgetown University through his high grades and school leadership positions. Bush was admitted to Harvard and Yale in spite of his poor intellectual achievements, on the strength of his father's position and connections. It was Clinton who conformed to the national ideal of the boy hero who made it on his own account under humble circumstances through hard work and strength of character.

The reality of George W. Bush's life is in dismal contrast with the classic American picture of common folks deserving of our trust. Whereas many rich boys make something of themselves independently, Bush the second

had a pampered youth and relied on his parents. He coasted through Andover, his elite high school without having to worry about studying. He spent his college years active as a fraternity student, whose main achievements were beer drinking and partying. His parents could be counted on to save him from himself and get him out of tight spots. He skipped military service and was not sent to Vietnam because his father arranged that he serve with the Texas National Guard instead. He frequently absented himself from duty and was released from duty two years before the end of his commitment. He is known to have been arrested by police at least three times for drunk driving and other misdemeanors. At least one arrest for cocaine possession was expunged from the record by a judge as a favor to his father. Much of this information comes from a well-researched book, 'Fortunate Son' by J.H. Hatfield. Heavy Republican and family pressure was applied to the original publisher of the book, St. Martin's Press, who promised to destroy all printed copies. The book was then picked up by another publisher; which did not prevent its much harassed author to commit suicide. Without the September 11 massacre and the need for national reassurance about the presence of a strong leader, the inconsistencies between imagery and knowable facts would probably not have been allowed to recede from people's minds.

As a businessman George W. Bush's record is mediocre or simply bad. He squandered other people's money on investments, and ran several businesses (Arbusto, Spectrum 7, Bush Exploration and Harken) into the ground. He became rich in his own right through insider trading and deals with powerful businessmen who were friends of the family. He was given a baseball team, the Texas Rangers, to manage, as a stepping stone to becoming governor of Texas. But he himself did not have to manage much. Right wing heavyweights in the Republican Party saw him as their ideal candidate for president because he would do what they told him, while being more acceptable to mainstream voters because of his relatively soft and seemingly compromising demeanor. When Bush became the most powerful man in the world he had considerably less experience than the average middle-class American male of managing his own life and maintaining a responsible position in society. It is fair to say that he never faced a substantial challenge before he became faced with September 11, his response to which is currently helping to decide the geopolitical fate of the planet.

Our television age has seen many examples of manufactured "great personalities" with mythology instead of personal history behind them. But the case of George W. Bush must count as one of the most spectacular instances of successful fiction. For some time now, the American presidency has been bought with the help of corporate sponsors, but candidates were still expected to demonstrate certain talents. George W. Bush, however, did little more than buy the presidency, and the deal was clinched only after his father sent his trusted political operatives to Florida, intimidated Albert

Gore and his team and resorted to legal sleights of hand. Many political observers consider it inconceivable that he could have become president in an age when actual political discussion on radio and in newspapers, rather than TV soundbites, shaped political opinion.

The real personal history of the most powerful man in the world is striking for its repeated instances of getting away with things that would have created permanent black marks against the names of normal people. This may be relevant for the way that George W. Bush regards the world. If he does realize that some actions have dire consequences, this will not be because of his upbringing. From witnesses who have observed him up close, friends and enemies alike, we hear that he believes himself to have the right to get his way. In an interview and book that were meant to be flattering he is quoted as having said: "I'm the commander, I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the President. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation." Where his admirers see a determined leader guided by "moral clarity", the rest of the world flinches from what appears to be an excess of rectitude.

The historian and political analyst, Michael Lind, who knows Texas, the land of his birth and upbringing, like his backpocket, traces some of these attitudes to the Texans among whom George W. Bush grew up. These Anglo-Celtic southerners, after conquering and expropriating other ethnic nations (Mexicans and Indians) for centuries became a "people as militaristic as the ancient Spartans", with a culture that is intellectually sterile and still marked by premodern superstitions. Lind: "Combine primitive Saudi-style oil-patch economics with primitive [Israeli] West Bank settler-type religion, and you have the milieu from which George W. Bush emerged and in which he feels most at home. As fate would have it, at the beginning of the twenty-first-century, ...leadership of the most advanced technological economy and the leading liberal society on earth has fallen to a reactionary politician from a premodern religious subculture rooted in a backward region with a primitive extractive economy. In siding uncritically with God's Chosen People in the Holy Land and hoping to use military force to try to control as much mineral-rich territory as possible, George W. Bush has been acting like a man of his century--the seventeenth century."

the tragic figure of George W. Bush

The potential consequences of power of such immensity as held by George W. Bush are difficult for us to digest. One way to handle this, denial, is to present such consequences in reduced and more easily grasped form. Great political power is by its nature something that belongs on the tragic plane of existence where out-of-the-ordinary things happen. But as such it cannot be emotionally tolerated by most of us on a daily basis, and is there-

fore routinely brought down to the trivial plane of existence where emotions and intellect are not too heavily taxed. And so it is with this president. "Dubya" has signed the death warrants of more people – over 130 – on death row than any other governor in the United States, but the way he portrays himself, as a common cog in the machine of justice, is plausible to many Americans. Dubya gave the OK for the devastation of Afghanistan causing the deaths of untold thousands. (In the British Guardian, the journalist Seumas Milne estimated that about ten thousand Afghan soldiers may have died in the war and cited University of New Hampshire Professor Marc Herold's estimate that about four thousand civilians have also died – to make a total of 14,000). Dubya initially encouraged Ariel Sharon in Israel to wage war against the Palestinians living in Israel, and has called him a "man of peace" (a label that even hawkish Israelis would not apply to the man who has been found responsible for massacres at Palestinian refugee camps in the 1980s). And to top it all, Dubya followed the agenda of schemers who aim to establish direct control over the Middle East; and with that has ignited a chain of events that may thunder over the world for decades to come, and make all our lives less safe. But still he is supposed to be just an ordinary Joe.

The George W. Bush story has the ingredients to make a Shakespearean drama. Power, corruption, along with personal weakness so extraordinary that it becomes a source of fascination. The story is of course not finished, and is replete with potential for a tragic denouement. But a playwright who tries to tackle it would face the major challenge of the core of this drama: the inner Bush, with deeper truths than what the biographical details summed up here reveal.

His eyes do not invite trust. But we are told that the person behind them is amiable, easy to get on with, and loyal to his friends. Crown Prince Abdullah, the effective ruler of Saudi Arabia, who spent some five hours with Bush on the presidential ranch in Texas, told a Saudi newspaper that while finding him woefully ignorant of important matters requiring his judgment on the Middle East, he also detected noble qualities in Bush.

It is possible to see George W. Bush as a product of circumstances – his family background, family expectations, and imagined political obligations – deserving pity. When he mocked an American reporter for asking the French president a question in French, or when he asks the Brazilian President Fernando Cardoso "do you have blacks too?", we see a man completely out of his depth when faced with a journalist and a Latin American colleague with vastly superior minds (Cardoso is a sociologist and an author and speaks four languages). His inability to speak coherently for any length of time without a prompter may be the consequence of a health deficiency. One author who has extensively studied Bush's lines in speeches and in interviews offers the suggestion that he is an amnesiac. Memory loss of a particular kind would explain the language jumble he produces, mixing up earlier rehearsed answers to possible questions and only getting small memo-

rized portions correct. Of course such a person should not ever have become president, but, again, he can be seen as a pitiable tool in the hands of those who put him where he is. That makes him a tragic figure.

But when we as outsiders think of George W. Bush we must think of him as the man in whose mind tilts the fate of the world, and we should not more than momentarily be swayed by pity for his largely unknown inner self.

The colossal irony of our time – one that gives us the impression of having landed in a Shakespearean drama – is that at our present juncture of world history, when a post-Cold-War order was still being sorted out, we do have a "most powerful man" in our midst, but one lamentably unfit for the job that he holds. It might seem an exaggeration to say that one could hardly have found a person more unsuited to wield the most power in the world than George W. Bush. But it is close to the truth.

In democracies we count on the fact that those who are placed highest above us in the political system have reached a high degree of maturity and a knowledge and understanding of the world that is above average. Bush has frequently been on the world stage thanks to satellite TV. As his every word is pored over and scrutinized by policy makers and analysts everywhere, he adds to the accumulating suspicion among other heads of government that there is no substance to the man. This president has not been able to brainstorm with America's former Cold War allies about approaches to shaping a desirable world under threat of terrorist attacks, not because these allies suffer from illusions of a peaceful paradise, but because he cannot participate in negotiations that require historical, long-range, and peripheral vision. He has gut-feelings and a political instinct of sorts, but these are not a substitute for strategic intelligence. At the same time, there are no states equal to the United States, which means that Bush never has to deal with an equal. From his inauguration onward Bush's entourage has not tired of making the world feel that the United States president deals with it exclusively on his own terms.

During the presidential election campaign of 2000, American conservatives and Republican doubters who worried about George W. Bush's competencies were reassured by rightwing organizers that there was no need for worry since Bush would be surrounded by able and experienced advisers. This expectation was also supposed to relax European concerns. It is, however, a fallacy to believe that such advisers can compensate for the incompetence of the man in the official center, and that they form a kind of substitute government. Figurehead "leaders" are not uncommon in the world. Japan presents a perfect example. But the United States does not have institutions that compensate for the weakness of such governments. There is nothing besides George W. Bush to mediate the advice that comes from Karl Rove, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle.

There could hardly be sadder evidence for this than the inability for the United States government to develop a policy for stopping the Israeli/Palestinian carnage. When the black and white, good vs evil frame of reference of the "war on terrorism" was projected onto that situation, everything became messier and more savage than it had been before. Bush's inability to understand the complexity of the situation concerning Israel and the Palestinians, and his demonstrated incompetence as a result of it, presages worse to come. The "roadmap" to peace is not believable because Ariel Sharon does not believe in it. In this one area of international politics where strong American pressure could have a wide-ranging beneficial effect, the George W. Bush administration is not willing to apply it.

In spite of the checks and balances that have evolved in the American political system to ensure democratic governance, George W. Bush is taking the Americans, and all of us along with them, back in time, close to the days of Kings against whose possible madness there was little defense. Some of America's fearless intellectuals, unimpeded by self-censorship, are beginning to give voice to proximate thoughts. Norman Mailer: "Since the administration can hardly be unaware of the dangers, the answer comes down to the unhappy likelihood that Bush and Company are ready for a major terrorist attack. As well as any number of smaller ones. Either way, it will strengthen his hand. America will gather about him again. We can hear his words in advance: "Good Americans died today. Innocent victims of evil had to shed their blood. But we will prevail. We are one with God." Given such language, every loss is a win." Paul Krugman, who has been an almost solitary voice of common sense in the New York Times, reported finally "more people than you would think" from Defense, State, and Treasury Departments "don't just question the competence of Mr. Bush and his inner circle; they believe that America's leadership has lost touch with reality."