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From campus to bookshelf: assessing a president

by Dennis McDaniel

THE COPRESIDENCY OF BUSH AND CHENEY

By Shirley Anne Warshaw

Published by Stanford Politics and Policy, \$29.95

Two U.S. presidents, two commencement addresses at Catholic colleges, three books and one faculty letter of protest: history as current as it can get.

The topic for the final spring semester 2009 First Friday forum at my school, St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pa., was "Is it appropriate for Notre Dame to invite President Obama to provide their commencement address? To receive an honorary degree? Can it be compared to having President Bush as a commencement speaker?"

As a Catholic institution, we at St. Vincent, like the faculty and staff at the University of Notre Dame, agonize over speaker invitations. Most importantly, like Notre Dame, we had invited a sitting president -- in our case, George W. Bush -- to be our commencement speaker.

The controversy surrounding the Bush invitation in 2007 raised similar issues regarding conflicting responses to Catholic teaching. Students, faculty and administrators who had opposed the Bush invitation stressed the injustice the war in Iraq, which had been criticized by both Pope John Paul II and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. By the spring of 2007, the war had reached perhaps its greatest level of public scrutiny. Bush proponents cited his "compassionate conservatism": his support for unborn children, for traditional notions of the family, and for the reduction of government bureaucracy through "faith-based initiatives."

Therefore, coming just two years after the Bush commencement speech, the Obama controversy was a ripe topic for discussion among students and faculty. I was asked to lead this discussion, I suppose,

because I was a contributor to and signatory of an open letter to Bush from the St. Vincent faculty. This letter, published just before the 2007 commencement, welcomed Bush but admonished him about his policies? contradictions of Catholic social teaching.



So, if Catholic teaching were my standard, wouldn't I be a

hypocrite to support Obama's appearance at a Catholic college, considering his support of *Roe v. Wade*? Well, I did support the Obama invitation. At the forum I argued that *Roe v. Wade* does not mandate abortion but only protects a woman's choice. Also, Obama was not morally responsible for *Roe v. Wade*'s existence, only for its perpetuation, which should not invalidate him as a speaker at a Catholic institution. However, I quietly resented giving this defense, as it revealed my acquiescence to the single-issue litmus test that has become common in Catholic institutions.

Despite its support for abortion rights, the Obama presidency promises to end the war in Iraq, engage in respectful global dialogue, ensure greater economic justice, effect more transparency and truth-telling, and establish affordable, universal health care. Taken as a whole, these promises suggest an administration closely aligned with Catholic social teaching. Yes, Bush supported "life issues" and purported compassion. Nevertheless, as the faculty letter stated, his preemptive war was unjust, his economic policies privileged the rich over the poor, and his "fear-mongering and threats diminish[ed] the value of discourse that colleges and universities cherish." Our letter was certainly neither the first or last shoe to be thrown at the Bush administration, but we hoped that it stressed policies and tactics rather than personalities, and defined the moral issues at stake.

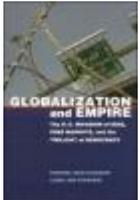
Three recently published books provide expertly researched and cogently argued elaborations of our letter's charges. Though all three meticulously analyze domestic policy, foreign policy, and economics, their shared concern is moral in nature: Due to its blind allegiance to a failed ideology, the Bush administration led the United States to war and economic collapse, and through its secrecy and rhetorical stratagems, it misled Americans and threatened the very basis of a free, democratic society.

This sense of threat underlies Shirley Anne Warshaw's *The Copresidency of Bush and Cheney*. Warshaw's book documents how Vice President Dick Cheney, with Bush's tacit approval, engineered a division of labor within the executive branch that coordinated the agendas of Christian conservatism and big business. Under this collaboration, Bush could champion his sense of a morally driven presidency -- his "compassionate conservatism." Bush, seeing his presidency as a calling to "do what God asked him to do," declared war to eliminate evil, initiated faith-based programs, and chose appointees based on their religious beliefs, which were usually evangelical Christian.

Bush's faith-based presidency coalesced well with Cheney's mission to reduce the burden of government-imposed environmental and energy regulations, to strengthen the executive branch, and to oust Saddam Hussein. Bush's ignorance of and lack of interest in hard policy matters freed Cheney to handle the day-to-day affairs of the executive branch, and to pursue his secretive, business-friendly agenda. As Cheney weakened government regulation, he strengthened the executive branch, enabling it to make policy without congressional knowledge or reproof.

Because Bush's evangelical Christianity distrusted science, Cheney could easily dismiss data that would lead to greater environmental regulation and recognition of climate change. Warshaw concludes that this copresidency has been a "disaster for the nation," for which Cheney is "largely to blame." But how can one lessen the moral responsibility of the one person who was in a position to overrule Cheney's decisions?

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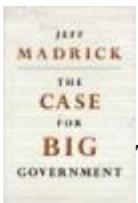


GLOBALIZATION AND EMPIRE: THE U.S. INVASION OF IRAQ, FREE MARKETS, AND THE TWILIGHT OF DEMOCRACY

By Stephen John Hartnett and Laura Ann Stengrim
Published by University Alabama Press, \$34.95

The disingenuousness and outright dishonesty of the Bush administration are the concerns of Stephen John Hartnett and Laura Ann Stengrim's *Globalization and Empire: The U.S. Invasion of Iraq, Free Markets, and the Twilight of Democracy*. The authors' background in rhetoric and political activism shines through this exhaustive and data-laden analysis. Hartnett and Stengrim contrast the Bush administration's public statements with its actual policies. The Bush administration, they argue, rhetorically manipulated available evidence to sell the country on the necessity of supporting the war in Iraq, and then used the pretense of reconstruction and establishment of democracy to disguise its intention to colonize this nation. Similarly, the Bush White House voiced the rhetoric of free markets, democracy and globalization to establish what amounts to a modern empire that subjects weaker nations to the strong.

Like Warshaw, Stengrim and Hartnett make no secret of their activist agenda; their explicit opposition to the Bush administration's "shameful" practices is essential to their principle of "rhetorical criticism as integrity." Also, like Warshaw, they stress the moral issues at the base of their criticism. They hope that their book will provide readers with the materials "necessary for understanding how liberty, freedom and democracy have been turned into powerful rhetorical instruments justifying globalization and empire."



THE CASE FOR BIG GOVERNMENT

By Jeff Madrick
Published by Princeton University Press, \$22.95

Though Cheney's puppetmastery and Bush's deceptions have received a fair amount of coverage in the press, Jeff Madrick's *The Case for Big Government* provides a distinctively novel argument. Subverting the conventional thinking of both Republican and Democratic administrations of the past four decades, Madrick persuasively argues that "the end of big government" has been a tragic mistake, and his statistics challenge any hardened neoliberal defense.

Madrick shows that the critique of government, theorized by Milton Friedman and subscribed to by Republicans and Democrats alike, has been based more on ideology than honest reading of the evidence, and this ideology is grounded in a ?willful misreading of history.?

The truth, says Madrick, is that an active and well-managed government, like those found in most Western democracies, promotes prosperity, enhances growth, aids private industry, and enables us to successfully respond to change. Rather than enslave us, sizable government enlarges our freedom by protecting our rights and providing us with public education and health care benefits necessary for citizens to pursue our individual desires. Madrick?s copious facts demonstrate that reductions in the size and function of government have led to lower real wages and less productivity.

The glorious laissez-faire past that neoliberals venerate is a distortion that hides the powerful role government regulation and spending has played in the nation?s growth. Madrick concludes that greater government intervention, in the form of wage supports, financial regulation, help for the changing family, investments in education and transportation, and universal health coverage will lead not only to greater prosperity, but also to greater social and economic justice.

Madrick hence joins Warshaw and Stengrim and Hartnett in an effort to refocus the question of morality and government onto the necessity of liberty and justice for all, plus honesty and candor in the manner in which government appraises evidence and formulates and reports policy.

Though these authors critique past administrations, attacking the Bush administration in particular, there is much in these books from which the Obama administration can learn. We have already witnessed Obama wavering on campaign promises that addressed key moral issues: He has preserved detainee tribunals, blocked access to torture photos and other evidence of that would lead to greater understanding of human rights abuses, prosecuted a war with ill-defined objectives and little allied support, and balked at expanding government to mend the economy and reform health care.

If the Obama administration values political survival over justice and truth, this president will have a lot of free time during future college commencement seasons.

In retrospect, was the St. Vincent faculty letter on target? Yes.

Did participants at the First Friday forum provide a clear, majority answer to distinctions between inviting a President Bush and inviting a President Obama? No. If a prospective speaker has made statements, or has associated with those who have made statements that support *Roe v. Wade*, gay rights or ?The Vagina Monologues? may we invite that speaker, regardless of his or her otherwise laudable leadership or achievement?

We certainly need to cut through the rhetoric as we decide.

If -- despite what we?ve learned from books like these three -- we had the opportunity to invite Bush back to give an account of his presidency, should we?

Of course.

Would the faculty write another letter of protest? Let?s face it, after these three books, would it need to?

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