

SENTENCING BUSH

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Whither Bush? The answer, I expect, concerns a sense of direction. Clare Boothe Luce famously noted that every great president is summed up by a single sentence, often oversimplified. George Washington was the father of his country. Abe Lincoln saved the union. Franklin Roosevelt got two sentences: He fought the Depression. He won World War II. Ronald Reagan won the Cold War. But a president's earning a sentence usually involves knowing what sentence is sought.

In 1980, during the early primaries, when the GOP race narrowed down to Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, I thought Bush would stand a better chance of winning than Reagan and that perhaps he might even make a better president.

I knew I was looking for a non-Democratic choice. I had voted for President Carter in 1976, but by 1980 I believed that the country had swung too far in a liberal direction, and that America needed a moderate conservative hand on the tiller, changing the direction somewhat. It was about direction, then and now.

I reasoned then that there was no need to, and no way to, rush change in a successful country. So I thought that Bush, the moderate conservative, could get more votes in a general election and quite possibly lead the country, better than Reagan, toward where it ought to go.

That's not the way things worked out. Reagan beat Bush in the primaries. Reagan was no far-out right-winger, and even if he were, he didn't govern that way and couldn't have if he wanted to. But he

had a sense of direction that he imparted to the country, to his great credit and our benefit. He wanted to win the Cold War, lower taxation and deregulate the economy. Freedom was his lodestar. The rest was detail work.

Bush the First was a good president; I give him a B plus. But he was perceived to be weak on precisely the issue where Reagan was seen to be strong: direction. He was seen as an in-box president. His putative lack of "the vision thing" was a caricature, but caricatures often have a root in truth.

Now comes President George W. Bush. He is offering direction with rather remarkable precision. He wants a tax cut because he thinks the taxpayers can use the money more wisely than the government. He wants accountability for the public schools, including vouchers if necessary, when the schools are failing. He thinks it would be good if Everyman becomes a capitalist through the partial privatization of Social Security. He wants tort reform because he sees that the legal system is a runaway truck. He thinks Republicans have gotten a bum rap on the compassion thing and wants to show how conservatism can complement compassion. There's a sentence in all that, struggling to get out.

Washington is having difficulty coming to terms with the idea of a president saying what he means and meaning what he says. Where's the hidden ball trick? What's he really up to? Does he really think he can change the tone? Will the spinning stop?

We shall see. There is always a reason for some cynicism in this wonderful capital. (Yes, it is a wonderful capital.) Politics has a life of its own. The Ashcroft nomination is a case in point. The liberals ask, will he enforce the law? That's what matters, they

say. The Republicans say he will enforce the law. That's what matters, they say.

It's a trick. Of course he will enforce the law. But what law? What, exactly, is the law on affirmative action? Can it include preference based on race? If it does, is that good for America or bad? The two sides disagree. Courts disagree. Clinton said mend it, don't end it. If there has been some mending on the part of the Clinton Justice Department, I've missed it. A Bush administration, with or without Ashcroft, will likely be looking at the law differently, changing the direction. By raising a ruckus, liberals want to put the Republicans on notice not to mess with their fiefdoms. Fair enough; it's a contact sport.

It is said that Dubya is the first president with a Masters in Business Administration and that he will be a CEO-style president, delegating this, that and the other thing. It may well start out that way. But events are in the saddle. They always are. Stuff happens. If there's a Gulf War, the CEO/MBA will likely be hands-on, pronto, even with Dick, Colin and Rummy giving advice. Even they will need direction.

Sometimes there can be too much direction. Newt Gingrich's problem was that he wanted to fuel a conservative revolution. Too much, too fast. Bush wants to preside over a conservative evolution, which is fine by me, and possibly sentence-worthy.

BEN WATTENBERG IS A SENIOR FELLOW AT THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE AND IS THE MODERATOR OF PBS'S "THINK TANK."

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