
Prologue

Mitchell B. Pearlstein

President, Center of the American Experiment

One of my first “introductions” to George W. Bush was by Ann Richards, ten years ago this summer. Ms. Richards, who was then governor of Texas, and I were participants in a conference in Colorado, and within sixty seconds of introducing my wife and myself to her, she had me laughing three times. Her juiciest line was about her likely opponent in her 1994 reelection bid, the oldest son of a former president of the United States. With perfect timing and drawl, she referred to him as “Boy George,” causing me to come within dangerous inches of spraying my Bloody Mary all over her, as I burst in mid-sip.

I’ve gotten to know Governor Richards reasonably well over the last decade, and while our politics have perpetually clashed, I admit she has kept me laughing. Though I also concede I glean great and respectful pleasure that the biggest and most satisfying laugh of all has come to be on her. Think of it as poetic justice, Texas-size.

George W. Bush knew how to get elected governor. Chief among his current talents is that he knows how to be president of the United States. For

proof, read two recent and very good books about him: *Bush at War*, by Bob Woodward, and *The Right Man*, by David Frum, the latter of whom spoke at an American Experiment luncheon forum in March. As with Ronald Reagan—who knew better than anyone since Franklin Delano Roosevelt what it took to lead a country—Mr. Bush is drawn to roping the hardest problems and the toughest threats. For Mr. Reagan, it was finishing off the Evil Empire. For Mr. Bush, it’s cutting off terrorism, root and weed. Mr. Reagan succeeded in his immense campaign. Mr. Bush is off to a lionhearted start in his.

We’ll return to Mr. Frum’s remarks in a moment. But leading the summer 2003 issue of *American Experiment Quarterly* is a related, eclectic, and frequently brilliant symposium, featuring nearly three dozen voices, on the “Bush Doctrine,” subtitled “A Preemptive Path to Peace or a Recipe for Perpetual War?” Most of thirty-four local and national writers pick the former answer, though a consequential few—and not just those on the left—fear the latter result.

This is the fourth symposium of this diverse sort in *AEQ* in the last three

years, starting with a package on “aim and tone in American conservatism” in the summer of 2000; a second on “downsizing government without degrading national defense” in the winter of 2001-02; and a third on “school choice in Minnesota” in the fall of 2002, following a gloriously good decision by the U.S. Supreme Court the previous June. My colleagues and I are particularly fond of the format, and we’ll continue returning to it on a regular basis. I welcome any topics you might suggest.

Here’s a sampling of views, starting with quotes from conservatively inclined men and women, who approve of the president’s approach to fighting terror.

Sen. Norm Coleman: Some say we can’t be the world’s policeman. But what’s wrong with being a policeman? And as the world’s only superpower, we can do a lot of things we could never do before. We don’t use our power to gain oil wells or diamond mines or farmlands. We use our power to free people from tyranny and to establish democracy.

Kimberly Crockett: The Bush administration’s response to September 11 has been remarkably measured. If Bush is a cowboy, he certainly is a patient one.

Jean Bethke Elshaint: Too much has been made of the “doctrine of preemption,” as if the Bush strategy will be invading one country after another on the off chance that these countries may, at some distant point, pose a threat to us. This is silly. . . . As to “perpetual war,” you don’t need a recipe for that. That is pretty much

what exists by definition, at least in situ, in the world as we know it.

Patrick Garry: [I]f at home we encourage whistle blowers to break ranks with their company when they feel it is acting wrongly, why shouldn’t the United States act unilaterally when the United Nations is wrong and when millions of people are suffering because of that wrong?

Rep. Mark Kennedy: [I]t may be time to relegate the United Nations to a role similar to that of the British monarchy, useful for ceremonial purposes but leaving serious matters to serious people.

Rep. John Kline: The freedom to choose diplomacy is another result of the policy of action—an option that might not have been available before the international community believed we were willing to back our words with decisive military force.

Marvin Olasky: The Bush Doctrine, which grows out of biblical compassion plus technological progress, is a recipe for neither perpetual war nor perpetual peace, but for a long cold war against terrorism that will have many heated moments. President Bush and future leaders, if they stay the course, will ask other countries to destroy terrorist bases within their borders. If they don’t act, the United States may do it for them, with minimal damage to civilian populations.

Sally Pipes: Expansionist, sadistic dictators such as Saddam Hussein, the administration knew full well, would never heel to the United Nations nor roll over for genteel Scandinavian weapons inspectors. Dictators do, however, understand military force, as is now fully evident.

D.J. Tice: Perhaps the [Bush administration’s] messianic rhetoric is

mainly visionary varnish on big-stick foreign policy.

Some friends on the left don't agree.

Will Marshall: Since the fall of Baghdad . . . Indian leaders have invoked the Bush Doctrine in threatening to attack Pakistan for allegedly supporting Islamic extremists responsible for violence in Kashmir. It's naïve to think other countries will cede to America an exclusive right to preempt.

Lynda McDonnell: In 2003, the face of America overseas is too often young men in body armor and humvees instead of health workers, diplomats, and teachers.

Terry Thompson: In the ramp-up to the Iraqi war, President Bush was singularly unconvincing in his assertions that he had not made up his mind, that war was his very final consideration. There is evidence now that the decision to go to Iraq was made shortly after 9/11. The yearning-for-peace rhetoric, when it defies reality, is double-talk that many Americans distrust. They perceive a country with a foreign policy of "ready, fire, aim."

Then there are some conservatives who are less than enamored with the president's tack.

Heather Mac Donald: In forging and acting upon the preemption doctrine, many conservatives have abandoned the great insight of conservative thought: the difficulty of engineering improvements in human society without producing unintended consequences. The unforeseen consequences of the Iraq invasion may haunt us for years to come.

Scott McConnell: In a world in which nuclear weapons can be packed into a suitcase and transported on a fishing trawler, Americans will need something besides raw military power to make them safe. They will need some genuine friends. For this reason, George W. Bush's "muscular" foreign policy may make him the worst president in our history.

And then there are some acute insights that fall outside the categories above. Here's just one.

John E. Haynes: It is difficult to envision substantial success in combating foreign anti-Americanism when the American academic world tells foreigners that the United States is an imperialist and racist power bent on world domination. To be sure, most academics are not anti-American leftists, but the tone of the academy is set by the hard left's loathing for the existing American constitutional and political order. The democratic left, which once set the tone for the academy, has withered and lapsed into pacifism. An academic right barely exists. How this problem can be dealt with is not clear, but that it must be confronted is.

In reading the columns, please keep in mind that they were written in April and May—after the war in Iraq began, but before scores of subsequent headlines.

Reaching back to March, what pertinent light might Mr. Frum have shed on President Bush's road to Baghdad (down the pike from Damascus)?

A former speechwriter for Mr. Bush, he contrasted his former boss with

those who “advocate a limited war aimed at just a few terrorists.” The president, instead, believes “we must deal with this evil entirely, to the end.” And if that means “taking apart the Middle East as it was and rebuilding it, so be it.”

Mr. Frum describes this option as hard and dangerous, as well as the one that “puts his presidency on the line.” But he concludes it’s the right choice. Personally, I concur, as I can neither cite nor begin to imagine a good alternative. Although I’m equally quick to underline Heather Mac Donald’s essential point about humility: it’s a mark of hubris to assume we know how things will work out, and not just because as cauldrons go, Middle Eastern heat approaches that of a kiln.

How do issues like these play themselves out in American colleges and universities? As suggested by John Haynes, generally skewed. Without limiting herself to questions of war, Katherine Kersten expanded on this theme in an April speech at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, reprinted here: “What Your Professors Won’t Tell You: Why Diversity Stops at the Classroom Door.”

American Experiment’s distinguished senior fellow for cultural studies contrasts the kind of “diversity” invariably spotlighted in college brochures (external characteristics such as skin color, ethnic background, etc.) with *intellectual* diversity; the “real” kind that’s “central to both a liberal education and a flourishing free society.”

Of this infinitely more important variety of ideas, perspectives and ways of understanding the world, Ms. Kersten argues that colleges and universities are the last place to look for them, “as you can generally find a wider spectrum of opinion in any bowling alley or fast-food restaurant than in the faculty lounges of a typical American university.” In the same way I agree with Mr. Frum’s conclusion, I agree with my colleague Kathy—though this time without any caveats.

This issue of *AEQ* closes, as usual, with columns on education by Chester E. Finn Jr., this time we bring you pieces on education in Iraq and “budget woes and whines.”

Also as usual, I invite your comments. Enjoy the sun, my friends. ■