

Downside UP

A Voice of Contemporary Political Economy, Volume V, Issue 8: October, 2005
Ronald G. Woodbury

Katrina and the President: A Failure of Intellect and Morality

By way of Michael Moore, millions of Americans of all political persuasions have seen the footage of George Bush receiving word on 9/11 that the World Trade Towers had been attacked by terrorists. Even those who have not seen the whole movie have had indelibly impressed upon their minds this image of the President of the United States seemingly struck dumb as minute after minute ticked by without reaction. His reaction, or lack thereof, has long baffled me.

Then came Katrina. For four days Bush did nothing in response to the growing disaster in New Orleans. What, on Monday, all Americans who watch the news knew was an impending disaster and, on Tuesday, they knew was a full-blown catastrophe, George Bush did not know until Friday when one of his aides made up a DVD of the television reports for Bush to look at on his first trip to New Orleans. (Evan Thomas, "How Bush Blew It," *Newsweek*, September 19, 2005, pp. 30-40.)

One does not have to hate the guy to be flabbergasted at his failure on both occasions to leap immediately to the tasks of leadership. On both occasions, it has been his advisers who, primarily on political grounds, have galvanized him into action. After 9/11, he then did all the right things. After Katrina, the delay was too long, the event too predictable, and the inadequacy of his response too public for a full recovery. The result was what we all know was a political failure as well as a management failure.

What I now understand is that both instances were even more failures of intellect and morality symptomatic of George Bush's entire presidency. Again and again he has exhibited an almost surreal inability to demonstrate a deep and abiding moral leadership for this country. From his dumbstruck first response to 9/11 and the war on Iraq, to his dishonest domestic program, to his efforts to shift the blame for New Orleans onto others, he has proved unable to understand for himself the right thing to do even when he does something. Instead, from the time a bunch of Texas oil billionaires first tapped him for governor to the corporate ideologues who run him now, he has allowed himself to be managed.

The result is a government, and now a society, unprepared for leadership in the world not only militarily and materially but intellectually and morally. Cry my beloved country.

Failures of Intellect and Morality: A Programmed President

The failures of leadership after 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina are a direct product of the absence in our president of an independent intellectual or moral compass. Without his handlers, he doesn't know what to do and, indeed, cannot do anything at all. Even the spin on his slowness to respond is managed. He is the first fully programmed president, chosen to sit as a figurehead atop the pyramid of legislation and intellectual justification created

first for Texas oil billionaires and now by right wing think tanks. For four days, he failed to respond to events in New Orleans because his handlers failed to tell him what was happening and what he needed to do. It might be argued that for his aides there was an element of racism in their failure to see the significance of what was going on in New Orleans, but for George Bush, it was systemic dysfunction.

It may surprise Downside Up readers to know that when I speak of a failure of intellect, I am not just using a fancy word for dumb. I don't know what kind of smarts – intelligence -- our president actually has. I do know that, for a whole series of reasons, he has not been able to create a presidential culture which enables him to use his intelligence. Creating this culture requires a broader kind of intellect than raw IQ or personal genius. A president needs a decision-making environment in which diverse views are welcomed and the leader has an opportunity to work through a variety of options to one which best suits his or her mind and values. An obvious model, familiar to many, is John F. Kennedy's approach to deciding the US response to Soviet missiles in Cuba. Although I think JFK was smart, it was more important that he was smart enough (and self-confident enough) to utilize the ideas of even smarter people. Bush has plenty of smart people around him but he hasn't had the good sense to make sure they represent a diversity of views sufficient to explore what are often complex issues.

I am convinced from a not inconsiderable experience and knowledge that the problem started with a reading disorder and that George Bush's inability to read well has translated into an extraordinary kind of ignorance and susceptibility to management by others. His reading disorder, most likely dyslexia, is why he always did poorly in school and, as he himself says, even today he never reads magazines and newspapers -- at most only an occasional biography. This is why he relies entirely on one-page summaries of issues, no matter how complex. This is why he repeats a litany of now very tired phrases in response to every crisis. This is why his understanding of issues is so simplistic and his religion so shallow. He has no independent sources of information beyond the people around him. As it turns out from the New Orleans catastrophe, he does not even watch television news, what many might say is a good thing if he read instead but in his case is a very bad thing because he hardly reads at all. (1)

Rather than go public with his problem and serve as a model for a nation where so many struggle with disabilities, he hides behind a wall of secrecy and belligerence. Newsweek explains that, aside from their reluctance to make him cut short his five-week vacation(!), his aides did not tell him about what was going on in New Orleans because they are afraid of his reactions to bad news. What his political handlers like to describe as resoluteness or at least firm-mindedness, when carried out in a framework of ignorance, is just small mindedness. It is not just bad news our president doesn't like to hear; he doesn't like to hear contrary opinion. Far from encouraging diverse points of view, he tends to equate disagreement with disloyalty. By this time in his presidency, all the advisers he has kept around him know the value of keeping any dissenting ideas to themselves. Colin Powell, Paul O'Neil, and the other dissenters are gone.

The Roots of A Moral Vacuum

The problem is that George Bush has a 12-year old's morality. To generalize, a 12-year-old's morality is rigid, inflexible -- unable to see the grays between black and white. She or he may be rebellious against the confines of rules and laws but rules and laws are all they see. They do what they are told, or not, but it is not based on any higher standard of behavior or morality superseding human-made rules and laws. Because George Bush is not capable of making the leap from the structure of rules and laws to the reality of living, he is incapable of seeing the world as a place in which sometimes there are multiple rights and

wrongs to choose from and that another's opinion might also be right. He does not see the point of working to treat others as you would have them treat you, to walk in another person's moccasins, to love and understand other human beings and cultures.

This is what is wrong with George Bush's religion and the whole right wing position on issues like abortion and a right to die. This is how, on the basis of information known to be faulty, he could order a war which would surely kill tens of thousands of people -- and lie about it. He is behaving like a 12 year old who has discovered he made a mistake and does not want to admit it. This is why our president is so vulnerable to the manipulation of right-wing ideology and political handlers. When faced with a crisis where a mature adult would at least understand the need to set a response in motion, George Bush has no idea how to respond. Without gurus, political or religious, to tell him what to do, he has no program, no rules to follow.

In effect, George Bush lives in a state of arrested moral development. It seems to me to derive from a lifetime in which he was never required to deal honestly with any of his failures or mistakes. I don't know exactly why a person fails to develop a mature morality, but I think it has to do with not being required in childhood, when growing up, to deal with the consequences of one's actions, to deal with a real world outside one's 12-year-old bubble. Bush grew up in a cocoon of wealth and privilege. If he made a mistake, his Daddy or his Daddy's friends, took care of it. He has no experience with other cultures, especially poor ones, in the United States or abroad. Daddy Bush missed giving him that part of a New England patrician's education -- maybe because by then the family had moved to Texas. (2)

Early on he discovered that if he could not talk his way out of failure, someone else would take care of it. He could pass through school without actually succeeding. George went to a wealthy private school because that is what wealthy private schools are for: rich and prestigious families. He got into Yale on his father's coattails. He partied through college and the national guard (a joke about which was one of the most unfortunate things he said when trying to appear empathetic towards New Orleans). Daddy and his friends got him into the Alabama National Guard along with other sons of the Texas elite (including Democrats). Daddy's friends funded his oil drilling company and held the bag when George bailed out. President Daddy's Security and Exchange Commission looked the other way when George used illegal inside information to sell his stock (eat your heart out Martha!). Caught DUI again and again, the police took George home without booking him and when some cop actually arrested him, the conviction mysteriously disappeared from his record. His cocaine addiction remains hidden behind a wall of obfuscation, concealment, and payoffs.

George Bush never admits a mistake because he never had to growing up. He never had to stand up to the consequences of his actions. What he learned from his growing up is that friends count; loyalty counts; benefactors count. That's why no one ever gets fired for failure in the Bush Government. Even Richard ("Brownie") Brown was only asked to step down from responsibility for the New Orleans aftermath, not fired as head of FEMA.

As demonstrated by the federal government's massive response to Hurricane Rita, starting long before it hit, now George knows what to do. But his knowing is all about politics, not empathy or understanding. Back in June, when the hurricane threat was in the election swing-state of Florida, he declared a state of emergency before a comparably modest hurricane had even struck.

A Nation Bereft of Leadership

The President of the United States offends me often but no more than when he makes historical analogies designed to justify his policies, enlarge his political constituency, or just make him look good. Bizarrely, one of those whose mantle he has tried to take on is Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I won't go into the grossly false analogy between liberating France from a foreign occupier and invading Iraq to overthrow a domestic dictator. It is the invocation of FDR with respect to domestic matters – even Social Security if you can believe it -- which here draws my ire and symbolizes the depths to which our nation's leadership has fallen under George Bush. (Delia M. Rios, "Bush Thinking Big, Looks to FDR for Lessons – but How Far?," www.newhousenews.com, May 20, 2005.) (3)

As president during the Great Depression, FDR was arguably the founder in the United States of government as social safety net, government for Americans unable to make it on their own in a capitalist society which handsomely rewarded the privileged and the ambitious, but degraded the weak and the disadvantaged. Born of wealth and privilege, FDR understood his birthright to be one of responsibility and duty. While no radical (4), at a time of crisis, in both the domestic economy and World War II, he responded with courageous leadership. He called for sacrifice with an understanding of government's responsibility, as stated in the Preamble to the Constitution, to provide not only for "the common defence" and "domestic Tranquility," but also for "Justice" and "the general Welfare." He made the rich, who profited most from both the capitalist system and the war, pay the most to offset the costs in human welfare as well as money.

Not George Bush. True to the dictates of his political operatives, he quickly assured the American people that they would not have to pay to secure and rebuild the city and the people of New Orleans any more than we have had to pay for the effort to secure and rebuild Iraq. "No tax increase" he told us. Tax cuts would continue. Let our grandchildren pay. The Republican Party will reduce other, already reduced, social programs -- that is, to help one set of poor people, we will take money from other poor people. The oil companies making billions out of this and the rest of our energy crises are untouchable.

Perhaps not a failure of intellect but surely a failure of moral leadership. Cry my beloved country. -- RGW

Footnotes

1. Sure, I could be wrong about why our president doesn't read but if I am, all we have left to explain his behavior is old-fashioned laziness. Instead of a failure of intellect, we would have entirely a failure of character -- immorality.
2. This is actually what most worries me about John Roberts on the Supreme Court. Like Bush, Roberts grew up in a cocoon of wealth and privilege and has had very little experience with less privileged people or people of other cultures.
3. "Listen to his late April press conference on that cherished, embattled entitlement program [Social Security]: 'Franklin Roosevelt did a wonderful thing when he created Social Security,' the president told reporters. The duty now, he averred, is to save it."
4. Most historians would argue that his goal was an essentially conservative one: to alter a capitalist society enough to protect it against revolution.

Web Site: Downside Up has had a web site, and will have one again, but since I changed internet service providers, I have not set up a web site on the new server. When set up, once again all previous articles will be there and can be read and printed out with a few clicks of your computer. In the meantime, if you need a back issue, email me at downsideup2@bellsouth.net.

Expanding the Readership: If you like what you see in Downside Up, feel free to forward this on to others. If you have received this by forwarding from someone else and you would like to be on the direct email list, email your email address to downsideup2@bellsouth.net. If you want to be taken off the email list, email to the same address.

Downside Up is published to educate the public about political, economic, and social issues from personal finance to international relations. In order to maintain flexibility in administration and allow for donations to political organizations, Downside Up is not set up as a charity and contributions are not tax-deductible. Email correspondence may be sent to downsideup2@bellsouth.net. Responses to email may appear in the newsletter but not necessarily be responded to personally.

Ronald Woodbury is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous. The web spinner's name is also best left anonymous.

Woodbury has a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history and economics from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL, where he continues to be active in church and community. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.