



It's about world history, stupid

by René Lüddecke

World history does not fall into symmetrical blocks of time but is instead divided by crucial events that mark the milestones of new eras. September 11th, 2001 appears to be such a historic date. George W. Bush and his administration have played a key role in defining politics at the beginning of the 21st century. With the upcoming presidential elections in November, America is not merely called upon to evaluate the poli-

cies of the Bush administration. It is also a trend-setting vote concerning the writing and interpretation of the first decade of 21st century history.

What will remain of George W. Bush? Arguably, his presidency did not start until Andrew Card approached him in a Florida elementary school, informing him about the strikes in New York. Since then Bush has been struggling with a

MAIN POINTS

The 2004 US presidential election is historical since it will determine the future of the new parameters for US politics and policy set by the Bush administration since 9/11: simple language for a complex reality, power arrogance, divisive leadership, a religious framing of politics, and neo-conservatism.

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structural inability to strike back effectively at “the terrorists” in a way an American President was expected to react to an act of war on American soil. The asymmetry between terrorist action and the power of western civilisation must have been as agonizing to the President as the incidents themselves. In an attempt to restore order and to ease the cognitive confusion, US politics took on a new set of political features. The new style of political perception, wording, action and interpretation has become the distinct character of the Bush-Presidency. Five primary features of the Bush presidency include:

1. SIMPLE LANGUAGE FOR COMPLEX SITUATIONS

By defining the post Cold War American project to be a “War on Terror”, the administration rapidly made clear that they would refuse to acknowledge the rules and complexities traditionally related to international affairs. The statelessness of terrorism, including all its interdependencies, was intellectually rejected. Instead a more easy-to-grasp concept was offered to create an impression that the government was able to counteract. Additional semantic exercises such as ‘axis of evil’

revealed the attempt to return to clear-cut Cold War dichotomies. Many Americans took this view for granted. This was the start of an active deconstruction of political complexities in international relations that raised concern on both sides of the Atlantic. Ironically, the chosen tactic did not succeed in gathering all Americans around the Star-Spangled-Banner. On the contrary, a deep divide and contradictions in society became increasingly visible.

2. ARROGANCE OF POWER

Key characters in the Bush administration are convinced that the ‘War on Terror’ cannot be fought effectively within the established rules and frameworks of international affairs. The term ‘War on Terror’ symbolises the point of no return. The political will to face terrorism was degenerated into the abstract missionary zeal of fighting evil which became more important than adhering to universally accepted institutions. Civil liberties, International Law and judicial essentials such as accusation and trial were set aside. Like a Captain Ahab, the Bush administration pursued policy objectives exceeding American capacities, exposing weakness instead of strength as intend-

ed. The arrogance of power reveals itself in even more contexts such as making the people believe that it is only a matter of time, money and manpower to make America safe. This was in turn based on a flawed 'Neoeconomic' equation where fighting a 'War on Terror', expanding homeland security and cutting taxes could be achieved at the same time.

3 . T H E 4 9 % - P R E S I D E N C Y

It will not only be the obscure manner of his investiture that will be a historic feature of the Bush-Presidency. The way in which George W. Bush has deliberately been President for only one half of the Americans is equally remarkable. Once in office, many American Presidents, have sought support even from those who had not voted for them. Reciprocally, Americans developed a certain loyalty towards their incumbent President. Inner contradictions and irreconcilable demands and hopes have always been part of American society. And yet American presidents have done their best to be responsive in a changing political environment. Breaking this tradition, George W. Bush has appeared comfortable in catering only to one half of the electorate.

4 . T H E P R E S I D E N T I A L S T Y L E : E V A N G E L I C A L P R E D E T E R M I N A T I O N

Another feature of deconstructing political complexities is the deliberate connection of politics and religion. The importance of religion for many Americans has always inspired Presidents to establish a bond between the administration and the people that reaches beyond daily politics. And yet the perplexing difference is that religion serves as justification for political action. While the imagery of determination, language and simplicity seems appealing, this path virtually eliminates political virtues such as critical thought, reflection and the possibility to be wrong in one's own judgement. A 'War on Terror' that replaces political deliberation with politico-religious arguments can neither be persuasive nor successful.

5 . S O C I A L C O G N I T I O N : N E O - C O N S E R V A T I V I S M A S D E - M O D E R N I S A T I O N

Neoconservative ideas have been the common ground on which the Bush Presidency has developed its attraction. The paradigm's appealing simplicity and rigidity invites its believers to escape from



the multi-faceted cognitive contradictions of modern societies. Neoconservative thinking is not a new feature of American society. Its political success, however, has divided the country and mobilised supporters and opponents alike. From a European perspective, it was thought that at least the political mainstream had successfully overcome many of the salient social issues (e.g. premarital sex, abortion, religion, homosexuality, anti-government-sentiments, gun control etc.). What makes the opponents clash in all these cases is that the battle is not about political issues, but about values. This hardly leaves a choice for reconciliation or compromise. The effect of Neoconservatism is nothing less than an attempt at demodernising a society because its acquired complexity is seen as undesirable by a politically decisive group. Incidentally, Neoconservative values also serve as a basis for the 'War on Terror'. A religiously predetermined fight between good and evil is able to gather support much easier than deliberations in a complex political environment.

But do these features represent the rationale of a new political century? Or will they be mere fragments of a one-term Presidency? US-Presidents have always mirrored the changes in society at their time for good - and for bad. Ironically,

by misjudging the political tasks, George W. Bush as a President and the USA as a Nation today encounter a whole new set of complexities. The experience of wanting to fight evil and having to face the incidents of Abu Ghraib; of wanting to protect freedom and create the Guantánamo prison and of wanting to export democracy and confining civil liberties at home can be seen as the start of an almost literary process of maturing; a coming-of-age for the USA. Political realities have usually proved to be stronger than any ideas politicians had about them. In a second term Bush will have to adapt to a more complicated political environment. Whether the five disturbing features listed will be reviewed, remains an open question. If America ousts President Bush, the message concerning the interpretation of the beginning of the 21st century is simple. The Bush-Experiment will have proven that there are no easy answers to the complex challenges of the 21st century. And America is willing to face them. So this time, it's not about a president – it's about world history.

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