

# The Triumph of Anything Goes

By David Greenberg

**W**e all know that George W. Bush's reelection would probably bring about more illiberal policies regarding social justice, education, the arts, economic fairness, environmental protection, consumer rights, racial equality, foreign policy, civil liberties, and workers' rights. Less obvious, but perhaps as consequential over the long term, is how a Bush victory in November would change the fundamental practice of democracy in Washington. If the public were to award Bush a vote of confidence on the basis of his first-term record, it would amount to a ratification of the ruthless style and philosophy that have underpinned Bush's presidency—what Barack Obama at the Democratic Convention called “the politics of anything goes.”

An oft-quoted quip of Bush's—“If this were a dictatorship, it'd be a heck of a lot easier, just so long as I'm the dictator”—certainly doesn't reflect any plan of his to abolish democratic procedures or principles. But it does reveal his impatience with those procedures and principles. Bush and his team have shown contempt for many of the bedrock elements of liberal democracy, including public access to information; a press that interrogates its leaders; a give-and-take between parties that represent different interests; a separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches; the preference for reason over the use of force; and the support of legal safeguards to prevent the arbitrary exercise of power by the executive. They have routinely violated the bounds of acceptable political behavior in a democracy.

The instances of this misbehavior are so numerous as to fill a small book; indeed, they've already filled many such books. Yet the anything-goes attitude comprises more than the sum total of these instances. It's a philosophy, a set of premises and prejudices, that scorns deliberation and dissent, exalts brute power, drips with disrespect for the spirit (if not the letter) of the law, stiff-arms compromise, and mocks the popular will.

It's hard to find a better exemplar of this attitude than George W. Bush. Nonetheless, Bush himself remains only the reigning figurehead of this philosophy. Since Newt Gingrich assumed the GOP leadership in the 1990s, and since the party became nearly congruent with the conservative movement, this strain of ruthlessness has come to permeate the Republican Party. Republican behavior during three major national traumas of late—the impeachment of Bill Clinton, the 2000 Florida election recount, and the invasion of Iraq—was strikingly

similar: In each case, their leaders rammed ahead, using means fair and foul, to reach a preordained outcome. Each time, they brushed aside not just the doubts of the American public or other nations, not just inconvenient facts, but also concern about the law itself. For these reasons, Bush has been eliciting comparisons to Richard Nixon, the last president who showed such contempt for democratic procedures.

Because Nixon was foolish enough to record himself committing high crimes, we now think of Watergate as an episode in which, as the cliché goes, the system works. The flip side of that statement, however, is that the system almost failed. Certainly, just after Election Day 1972, when Nixon had routed George McGovern, many Americans were despairing that his thuggery would go unpunished. Talk of “repression” and “gangsterism,” which had just months before seemed like so much New Left sloganeering, now approximated reality. And Nixon himself knew well that his 1972 victory strengthened his hand to wreak revenge. Throughout that fall, he spoke privately about the viciousness with which he would retaliate, once reelected, against his political foes on the left and in the press.

Something similar could happen following a Bush win this November. For the electorate to turn Bush out of office would be to proclaim that it rejects this manner of politics. But to award Bush another four years—provided he really wins this time—would signal that a majority of Americans not only tolerates but endorses his anti-democratic style. And it could be interpreted by Democrats as a lesson that resistance is futile.

Already, despite losing the popular vote, Bush has governed as if he'd won in a landslide. “From the very day we walked in the building, [there was] a notion of a sort of restrained presidency because it was such a close election,” Cheney has said, “that lasted maybe 30 seconds.” And with a Republican-controlled Supreme Court and Congress, Bush and Cheney faced few checks on their power.

Should Bush win a second term, the politics of anything-goes would only intensify—because it would no longer be seen as controversial. It would no longer be noteworthy that an administration declassifies documents to embarrass opponents, as when John Ashcroft released a memo by former Clinton administration official and 9/11 Commission member Jamie Gorelick. It would become more or less acceptable to threaten the jobs of bureaucrats who won't play ball in misleading Congress, as happened with chief actuary Richard Foster,

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who wanted to answer congressional questions about the price tag of the administration's Medicare plan. Or to toss aside legal and constitutional rights of the accused, as at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Or to interfere with the public's right to know, as the administration did in ordering federal agencies to provide fewer records under the Freedom of Information Act.

Fifteen years ago, conservatives put forth the "broken windows" theory of crime. If small street crimes are tolerated, the theory went, neighborhoods begin to accept them as normal and the result is more lawlessness. The same thing will happen if a democracy tolerates Bush's ruthless behavior as business as usual. If voters validate this *modus operandi*, it won't just accelerate; it will cease to

draw even the modest level of scrutiny and outrage that the administration's transgressions have attracted so far. Failing to protest these breaches of the norms that govern political conduct will encourage more such violations.

Historically, second-term presidents have gotten cocky and overreached: Franklin D. Roosevelt with his court-packing plan, Nixon with Watergate (which began in his first term), Ronald Reagan with Iran-Contra. But no law of history decrees that the system always corrects itself. With no independent counsel and no Democratic Congress to investigate, with a press cowed into submission, with a court system loaded with Federalist Society apparatchiks, who will restrain Bush's ruthless agenda? Only the people. And the only time they can do it is on Nov. 2. ♦

# The Plutocrats Go Wild

By James K. Galbraith

**N**ext year's economic difficulties are already on the horizon. Growth is slowing as the housing market cools and consumers rein in their spending. Inflation is rising a bit, driven mainly by oil prices, health care costs, and corporate price increases, fueling a spectacular recent profit surge. Job creation is weak, and wages are flat. This is the new stagflation—an unpleasant reminder of the economic cost of unilateral war.

But George W. Bush has never tried to fix the economy in the short term. His focus is on making long-term—and, he hopes, irreversible—changes to taxes and social programs; foreign policy; and the government's capacity to regulate the environment, natural resource use, and corporate behavior.

Bush's top economic priority has always been to cut taxes on the wealthy; as he famously said, the "have-mores" are his political base. The marginal income-tax rate, the estate tax, the tax on dividends, and the proceeds of the profits tax all fell sharply in his first term. His second term could finish the job, shifting the tax base to consumption, perhaps even abolishing the income tax for a value-added tax (as Republican Speaker Dennis Hastert now suggests). Virtually the whole tax burden will then fall on the middle class, on working Americans, and on the poor.

As revenues fall, spending programs will come under new

attack. But not defense spending: The Pentagon's budget will remain inviolate. Indeed, the military may demand still more spending, as the true costs of stabilizing Iraq gradually become clear. New arms races—with North Korea over missiles and missile defense—and new conflicts, perhaps with Iran or China, may come into view. We will need many more soldiers and much more money if such conflicts occur.

And so, given the budget deficits ahead, the battle royal will be fought over what remains of federal social spending. With Alan Greenspan at his side, Bush will challenge Congress to slice, dice, and eviscerate. The privatization of Social Security—an invisible issue right now—will surely resurface once the votes are safely cast in November.

Meanwhile Greenspan will try to steer between a cost-driven price inflation and a sagging labor market. Should he raise interest rates or hold the line? The Fed started boosting rates just before the recent spate of bad economic news revealed slower growth, weak job gains, slumping consumer spending, and falling producer prices. This shows that its insight into our present problems isn't deep.

Indeed, the Fed is driving blind. Greenspan is aiming for a "natural interest rate"—a hypothetically neutral interest rate that would neither stimulate nor retard growth or inflation—whose value, as he admits, he doesn't know. How this idea came to dominate Fed thinking isn't clear. The concept is a throwback to the economics of a century ago and is the basis of almost no modern research. But we do know that higher interest rates will mean more pressure on debt-ridden households, slower consumer spending growth, and

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