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A President Forgotten but Not Gone

By [FRANK RICH](#)

WE like our failed presidents to be Shakespearean, or at least large enough to inspire Oscar-worthy performances from magnificent tragedians like Frank Langella. So here, too, George W. Bush has let us down. Even the banality of evil is too grandiose a concept for 43. He is not a memorable villain so much as a sometimes affable second banana whom Josh Brolin and Will Ferrell can nail without breaking a sweat. He's the reckless Yalie Tom Buchanan, not Gatsby. He is smaller than life.

The last [NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll](#) on Bush's presidency found that 79 percent of Americans will not miss him after he leaves the White House. He is being forgotten already, even if he's not yet gone. You start to pity him until you remember how vast the wreckage is. It stretches from the Middle East to Wall Street to Main Street and even into the heavens, which have been a safe haven for toxins under his passive stewardship. The discrepancy between the grandeur of the failure and the stature of the man is a puzzlement. We are still trying to compute it.

The one indisputable talent of his White House was its ability to create and sell propaganda both to the public and the press. Now that bag of tricks is empty as well. Bush's first and last photo-ops in Iraq could serve as bookends to his entire tenure. On Thanksgiving weekend 2003, even as the Iraqi insurgency was spiraling, [his secret trip to the war zone](#) was a P.R. slam-dunk. The photo of the beaming commander in chief bearing a [supersized decorative turkey](#) for the troops was designed to make every front page and newscast in the country, and it did. Five years later, in what was intended as a farewell victory lap to show off Iraq's improved post-surge security, Bush was [reduced to ducking shoes](#).

He tried to spin the ruckus as another victory for his administration's program of democracy promotion. "That's what people do in a free society," he said. He had [made the same claim](#) three years ago after the Palestinian elections, championed by his "freedom agenda" (and almost \$500 million of American aid), led to a landslide victory for Hamas. "There is something healthy about a system that does that," Bush [observed at the time](#), as he congratulated Palestinian voters for rejecting "the old guard."

The ruins of his administration's top policy priority can be found not only in Gaza but in the new "democratic" Iraq, where the local journalist who tossed the shoes was [jailed without formal charges](#) and may have been tortured. Almost simultaneously, opponents of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki accused him of making [politically motivated arrests of rival-party government officials](#) in anticipation of this month's much-postponed provincial elections.

Condi Rice [blamed the press](#) for the image that sullied Bush's Iraq swan song: "That someone chose to

throw a shoe at the president is what gets reported over and over.” We are back where we came in. This was the same line Donald Rumsfeld used to deny the significance of the looting in Baghdad during his famous “Stuff happens!” [press conference of April 2003](#). “Images you are seeing on television you are seeing over, and over, and over,” he said then, referring to the much-recycled video of a man stealing a vase from the Baghdad museum. “Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?” he asked, playing for laughs.

The joke was on us. Iraq burned, New Orleans flooded, and Bush remained oblivious to each and every pratfall on his watch. Americans essentially stopped listening to him after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, but he still doesn’t grasp the finality of their defection. Lately he’s [promised not to steal the spotlight](#) from Barack Obama once he’s in retirement — as if he could do so by any act short of running naked through downtown Dallas. The [latest CNN poll](#) finds that only one-third of his fellow citizens want him to play a post-presidency role in public life.

Bush is equally blind to the collapse of his propaganda machinery. Almost poignantly, he keeps trying to hawk his goods in these final days, like a salesman who hasn’t been told by the home office that his product has been discontinued. Though no one is listening, he has given [more exit interviews](#) than either Clinton or Reagan did. Along with old cronies like Karl Rove and Karen Hughes, he has also embarked on a Bush “legacy project,” as Stephen Hayes of The Weekly Standard [described it on CNN](#).

To this end, Rove has repeated a stunt he [first fed to the press two years ago](#): he is [once again claiming](#) that he and Bush have an annual book-reading contest, with Bush chalking up as many as 95 books a year, by authors as hifalutin as Camus. This hagiographic portrait of Bush the Egghead might be easier to buy were the former national security official Richard Clarke not [quoted in the new Vanity Fair](#) saying that both Rice and her deputy, Stephen Hadley, had instructed him early on to keep his memos short because the president is “not a big reader.”

Another, far more elaborate example of legacy spin can be [downloaded from the White House Web site](#): a booklet recounting “highlights” of the administration’s “accomplishments and results.” With big type, much white space, children’s-book-like trivia boxes titled “Did You Know?” and lots of color photos of the Bushes posing with blacks and troops, its 52 pages require a reading level closer to “My Pet Goat” than “The Stranger.”

This document is the literary correlative to “Mission Accomplished.” Bush kept America safe (provided his presidency began Sept. 12, 2001). He gave America record economic growth (provided his presidency ended December 2007). He vanquished all the leading Qaeda terrorists (if you don’t count the leaders bin Laden and al-Zawahri). He gave Afghanistan a thriving “market economy” (if you count its skyrocketing opium trade) and a “democratically elected president” (presiding over one of the world’s [most corrupt governments](#)). He supported elections in Pakistan (after propping up Pervez Musharraf past the point of no return). He “led the world in providing food aid and natural disaster relief” (if you leave out Brownie and Katrina).

If this is the best case that even Bush and his handlers can make for his achievements, you wonder why they bothered. Desperate for padding, they devote four risible pages to portraying our dear leader as a zealous

environmentalist.

But the brazenness of Bush's alternative-reality history is itself revelatory. The audacity of its hype helps clear up the mystery of how someone so slight could inflict so much damage. So do [his many print and television exit interviews](#).

The man who emerges is a narcissist with no self-awareness whatsoever. It's that arrogance that allowed him to tune out even the most calamitous of realities, freeing him to compound them without missing a step. The president who famously couldn't name a single mistake of his presidency [at a press conference](#) in 2004 still can't.

He can, however, blame everyone else. Asked ([by Charles Gibson](#)) if he feels any responsibility for the economic meltdown, Bush says, "People will realize a lot of the decisions that were made on Wall Street took place over a decade or so, before I arrived." Asked if the 2008 election was a repudiation of his administration, he says "it was a repudiation of Republicans."

"The attacks of September the 11th came out of nowhere," he said [in another interview](#), as if he hadn't ignored frantic intelligence warnings that summer of a Qaeda attack. But it was an "intelligence failure," not his relentless invocation of patently fictitious "mushroom clouds," that sped us into Iraq. Did he take too long to change course in Iraq? "What seems like an eternity today," [he says](#), "may seem like a moment tomorrow." Try telling that to the families of the thousands killed and maimed during that multiyear "moment" as Bush stubbornly stayed his disastrous course.

The crowning personality tic revealed by Bush's final propaganda push is his bottomless capacity for self-pity. "I was a wartime president, and war is very exhausting," he [told C-Span](#). "The president ends up carrying a lot of people's grief in his soul," he [told Gibson](#). And so when he visits military hospitals, "it's always been a healing experience," he [told The Wall Street Journal](#). But, incredibly enough, it's his own healing he is concerned about, not that of the grievously wounded men and women he sent to war on false pretenses. It's "the comforter in chief" who "gets comforted," he explained, by "the character of the American people." The American people are surely relieved to hear it.

With this level of self-regard, it's no wonder that Bush could remain undeterred as he drove the country off a cliff. The smugness is reinforced not just by his history as the entitled scion of one of America's aristocratic dynasties but also by his conviction that his every action is blessed from on high. [Asked last month by an interviewer](#) what he has learned from his time in office, he replied: "I've learned that God is good. All the time."

Once again he is shifting the blame. This presidency was not about Him. Bush failed because in the end it was all about him.

*Maureen Dowd and Thomas L. Friedman are off today.
The public editor's column will return next week.*

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