

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY**NOTORIOUS**
now playing**January 18, 2009****OP-ED COLUMNIST**

The Long, Lame Goodbye

By MAUREEN DOWD

WASHINGTON

As Barack Obama got to town, one of the first things he did was seek the counsel of past presidents, including George Bush senior.

As W. was leaving town, one of the last things he did was explain why he never sought the counsel of his father on issues that his father knew intimately, like Iraq and Saddam.

When Brit Hume did a joint interview last week with Bush father and son, dubbed “41st guy” and “43rd guy” by W., the Fox anchor asked whether it was true that “there wasn’t a lot of give and take” between them, except on family matters.

“See,” the Oedipally oddball W. replied, “the interesting thing is that a president has got plenty of advisers, but what a president never has is someone who gave him unconditional love.”

He talks about his father, the commander in chief who went to war with Saddam before he did, like a puppy. “You rarely have people,” he said, “who can pick up the phone and say, ‘I love you, son,’ or, ‘Hang in there, son.’ ”

Maybe he wouldn’t have needed so many Hang-in-there-sons if he had actually consulted his dad before he ignorantly and fraudulently rammed into the Middle East.

When W. admits the convoluted nature of his relationship with his father, diminishing a knowledgeable former president to the status of a blankie, you realize that, despite all the cocky swagger we’ve seen, this is not a confident man.

That is vividly apparent as we watch W. and Obama share the stage as they pass the battered baton. One seems small and inconsequential, even though he keeps insisting he’s not; the other grows large and impressive, filling Americans with cockeyed hope even as he warns them not to expect too much too soon.

Even Obama’s caution — a commodity notably absent from the White House for eight years — fills people with optimism.

W. lives in the shadow of his father’s presence, while Obama lives in the shadow of his father’s absence. W.’s parlous presidency, spent trashing the Constitution, the economy and the environment, was bound up, and

burdened by, the psychological traits of an asphyxiated and pampered son.

The exiting and entering presidents are opposite poles — one the parody of a monosyllabic Western gunslinger who disdains nuance, and one a complex, polysyllabic professor sort who will make a decision only after he has held it up to the light and examined it from all sides.

W. was immune to doubt and afraid of it. (His fear of doubt led to the cooking of war intelligence.) Obama is delighted by doubt.

It's astonishing that, as banks continue to fail and Americans continue to lose jobs and homes, W. was obtuse enough to go on TV and give a canned ode to can-do-ism. "Good and evil are present in this world," he reiterated, "and between the two of them there can be no compromise."

He gives the good-and-evil view of things a bad name. Good and evil are not like the Redskins and the Cowboys. Good and evil intermingle in the same breath, let alone the same society. A moral analysis cannot be a simplistic analysis.

"You may not agree with some of the tough decisions I have made," he said Thursday night. "But I hope you can agree that I was willing to make the tough decisions."

Actually, no. His decisions have been, for the most part, disastrous. If he'd paid as much attention to facts as fitness, 9/11, Iraq, the drowning of New Orleans, the deterioration in Afghanistan and the financial deregulation orgy could have been prevented.

Bush fancied himself the Decider; Obama fancies himself the Convener. Some worry that a President Obama will overdo it and turn the Situation Room into the Seminar Room. (He's already showing a distressing lack of concern over whether his cherished eggheads bend the rules, like Tim Geithner's not paying all his taxes, because, after all, they're the Best and the Brightest, not ordinary folk.)

W., Cheney and Rummy loved making enemies, under the mistaken assumption that the more people hated America, the more the Bushies were standing up for principle. But is Obama neurotically reluctant to make enemies, and overly concerned with winning over those who have smacked him, from Hillary and Bill to conservative columnists?

If W. and Cheney preferred Fox News on the TVs in the White House because they liked hearing their cheerleaders, Obama may leave the channel on Fox because he prefers seducing and sparring with antagonists to spooning with allies.

Right now, though, it's a huge relief to be getting an inquisitive, complicated mind in the White House.

W. decided there was no need to be president of the whole country. He could just be president of his base. Obama is determined to be president of as much of the country as possible.

We're trading a dogmatic president for one who's shopping for a dog. It feels good.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
