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Failures to Communicate

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By Richard Cohen
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Former president George W. Bush and some of his White House aides are [gathering](#) in Dallas this week to plan the future [George W. Bush Policy Institute](#). There, I guess, they will ponder grand themes and marble foyers, but I propose they begin by simply renaming the place. I suggest naming it the "George W. Bush Institute of Management Failure" and dedicating it to studying how this presidency went so wrong -- a task as big as Texas itself.

Bush's tenure was truly remarkable. He left office with the lowest presidential poll ratings in 60 years, two wars begun and not ended, and the deepest recession since the Great Depression. If it's true that we learn from our mistakes, Bush's eight years represent a bonanza of lessons.

What commends the Bush presidency to further study was its sheer managerial ineptitude. This is irony aplenty for a man not known for irony. Bush's one area of expertise, after all, supposedly was in management. Not only had he been a businessman, but he had graduated from Harvard Business School. Bush was the Decider. He was a delegator. He was precise and punctual -- early to the office, early out of the office and a clean desk at all times. Wow!

Conventional wisdom holds that the bungling of the Iraq war was a consequence of ideology run amok. Maybe. But it was also an example of awful management. Whether you supported the war or opposed it, you have to concede that it should have ended years ago and, along with the invasion of Grenada, be a fit dissertation subject for a desperate PhD candidate and not, as it remains, a festering debacle.

At the insistence of Donald Rumsfeld, the war was fought with too few troops, and then, when the country was occupied, too few troops were there to maintain law and order. Matters were made infinitely worse when L. Paul Bremer, Rumsfeld's designated viceroy, disbanded the Iraqi army, freeing a good many armed and unemployed young men to shoot the place up. Bremer also purged Baath Party members from the government, leaving precisely no one in senior positions who knew anything. This, the evidence suggests, was modeled on the Bush White House itself.

Had Bush, Rumsfeld and Bremer performed better, the war might have ended a lot sooner. It finally took the surge to get things under control -- and that may yet turn out to be too optimistic a statement. Still, the surge would not have been necessary had the war been handled competently from the beginning.

The war in Afghanistan waged against the Taliban, which had provided Osama bin Laden with sanctuary, was similarly mishandled. Once again, too few troops were sent to do too big a job. Good managers know how to make choices. Bush not only chose wrongly when he gave Iraq precedence over Afghanistan, but he chose not to choose at all when he thought both wars could be fought on the

cheap -- no draft, no tax hike, no sacrifice from the general public.

The Bush Institute of Management Failure should also look into how the administration was so late in noticing that the country was slipping into a profound recession. This should be coupled with a look-see at how Bush's various appointees failed to regulate the banking, insurance, housing and mortgage industries. (Have I mentioned Hurricane Katrina and "[Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job?](#)" No? Just as well.)

Bush and his aides ought to devote time to what went wrong at the Justice Department. It was politicized and mismanaged to the point where even the Senate noticed. U.S. attorneys apparently had to pass political muster, the Constitution was interpreted along monarchical lines, and somehow the trial of Ted Stevens was so botched that his conviction was thrown out. Alberto Gonzales, a Bush crony, was supervised from the White House by Harriet Miers, an old Bush friend whose qualification for the job was that she was an old Bush friend.

If Bush and his aides do get around to politics, it is my fondest wish that they ask the always voluble Karl Rove -- that latter-day [Mark Hanna](#) who was going to create a Republican era to last 30 or 40 years -- what happened. Rove has reduced the Republican Party to himself, Rush Limbaugh and a scattering of red ties in Congress that only he can name. He has so very much to teach us.

Bush's presidency -- rich in lessons -- should keep everyone occupied deep into the night. If it's not too late -- and especially for those already critical of Barack Obama -- let me suggest dessert.

How's humble pie?

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