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# What Is a Bush Republican?

*Daniel Casse*

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IN 1976, when he first ran for the Republican presidential nomination against Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan was generally seen as the leader of a fringe movement, audaciously challenging the moderate, business-focused establishment of the party. Today, 25 years after Reagan assumed office, it is hard to exaggerate his influence on American politics in general and on the conservative movement in particular. Many of the once-controversial elements of his philosophy—tax cuts to spur economic growth, a build-up of American defense forces, confronting totalitarianism abroad, an end to welfare dependency at home—are today embraced by most (but not all) Republicans and even some Democrats, and the conservative movement he headed has effectively become the established core of the GOP. This transformation has been one of the great ideological triumphs in American politics.

Yet, for much of the tenure of George W. Bush, the man most often said to have inherited Reagan's mantle, conservatives have been voicing dismay over the state of their movement. Over the past year, significant fissures have opened up within the old "Reagan coalition" over foreign policy, immigration, and other issues, but most especially over the growth in federal spending and the size of government. Indeed, a number of conservatives have

recently taken to arguing that the expansion of government programs under Bush amounts to an out-and-out betrayal of Reagan's legacy.

Does this matter? As controversial as Bush's domestic record has been, his reputation as a President will almost certainly depend on the success or failure of our campaign in Iraq and the war on terror. Although his management of that effort has been the subject of harsh criticism from some Republicans and conservative columnists, relatively few are prepared to say that the effort itself is at odds with Reaganism.

Even in the area of domestic policy, moreover, Bush's record has won universal praise from his conservative base on at least some issues. His 2001 tax cuts are widely credited with having turned around a moribund stock market. Despite a slowdown in the fourth quarter of 2005, the economy has performed strongly over the past two years, with inflation, unemployment, and interest rates all at satisfyingly low levels. The successful appointment to the Supreme Court of two solidly conservative judges has burnished Bush's stature among legal conservatives who were momentarily chagrined by the fiasco of the Harriet Miers nomination. His uncompromising stands on abortion and gay marriage are likewise deeply appreciated. Nor has Bush ever been coy about the centrality of his religious faith, which, whether it has informed policy-making or not, has given him a deep personal tie with Christian conservatives and evangelicals.

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But beneath and despite all this, there is a rankling discontent over the escalating size and scope of government under Bush, and over the sins of corruption and self-dealing that are seen to be its inevitable accompaniment (“that closed, parasitic culture of convenience,” as Andrew Ferguson wrote in the *Weekly Standard*, “with its revolving doors, front groups, pay-offs, expense-account comfort, and ideological cover stories”). More and more frequently, in one form or another, it is said that Bush has led both conservatives and the GOP in an unprincipled and politically risky direction. The charge now shadows the mid-term election cycle, even as it sets the stage for a more contentious battle over the choice of Bush’s successor in 2008.

**G**RUMBLINGS OVER the state of core conservative principles reached a crescendo this past January when the lobbyist Jack Abramoff pleaded guilty to charges of fraud, tax evasion, and bribery of public officials. A high-profile figure in Washington circles, Abramoff had been a close ally of the conservative activist Grover Norquist and through various schemes and front groups had funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars to Republican Congressmen. Aiming a barbed arrow at the heart of the Bush administration, Peggy Noonan, a former Reagan speechwriter, excoriated the susceptibility of too many Republicans to the enticements of a free-spending government. “Political corruption,” she wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, “is always more likely when you fall in love with the steamroller.”

The Abramoff implosion, loud as it was, capped a long period of steadily mounting conservative resentment at the administration’s spending habits. “What we have now is a President who spends like Carter and panders like Clinton,” complained Veronique de Rugy and Tad DeHaven, two analysts at the libertarian Cato Institute, in 2003. The signing of a particularly bloated transportation bill last July impelled George Melloan of the *Wall Street Journal* to assert that “Bush has few peers among American Presidents in his willingness to let Congress spend as freely as it always wants to do.” More recently, the President’s plan to spend more than \$100 billion to rebuild New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina led to what the *Washington Post* described as the “loudest and most widespread dissent Bush has faced from his own party since it took full control of Congress in 2002.” And projections of still growing deficits in the most recent federal budget have once again un-

leashed charges that the administration has wandered disastrously from the Reaganite path. As Jonah Goldberg charged in *National Review*, “too many in the GOP have felt the rush that comes with giving out other people’s money. . . . We have confused ‘low taxes’—which we all like—with limited government, which we don’t have.”

**N**O ONE has made the case more forcefully than Bruce Bartlett in his new book, *Impostor: How George W. Bush Bankrupted America and Betrayed the Reagan Legacy*.<sup>1</sup> In its tone of outright contempt for the President, the book is reminiscent of anti-Bush screeds by left-wing journalists like Molly Ivins or David Corn. But its substance is not so easily dismissed. For many years, Bartlett, an expert on the federal budget, has been a respected observer of and participant in Republican politics, holding Treasury posts in both the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations and serving on the Joint Economic Committee of Congress. In hundreds of newspaper columns over the last two decades he has cogently made the case for policies of low taxation and limited government.

But in the last few years Bartlett has become something of a Republican apostate, at least when it comes to this administration. Most of Bush’s governing philosophy, he charges in this book, is not just at odds with but antithetical to the traditional conservative agenda. So great is the economic damage wrought by Bush’s policies, in Bartlett’s judgment, that it can be reversed only by means of dramatic tax increases—a stunning conclusion from one who has devoted much of his career to arguing for supply-side tax cuts.

In the opening pages, Bartlett summarizes both his credentials and the essence of his case:

I write as a Reaganite, by which I mean someone who believes in the historical conservative philosophy of small government, federalism, free trade, and the Constitution as originally understood by the Founding Fathers. On that basis, Bush is clearly not a Reaganite or “small c” conservative. Philosophically, he has more in common with liberals, who see no limits on state power as long as it is used to advance what they think is right. In the same way, Bush has used government to pursue a “conservative” agenda as he sees it. But that is something that runs totally contrary to the restraints and limits to power inherent in the very nature of traditional conservatism.

<sup>1</sup> Doubleday, 320 pp., \$26.00.

The list of Bartlett's grievances is lengthy. Whereas Reagan-era policies stressed the importance of small business, the Bush administration prefers to bestow its favors on large companies, reviving the big-business corporatism that characterized Republican politics of the Eisenhower era. Where pro-growth conservatives stand for multilateral free trade, the Bush administration has pursued select free-trade agreements while raising protectionist subsidies for American agriculture, a move reminiscent of Herbert Hoover. On domestic social policy, Bartlett groups Bush with Richard Nixon, wondering aloud whether history will judge them as "two superficially conservative Presidents who enacted liberal programs in order to buy votes for reelection."

Eisenhower, Hoover, Nixon—these names, in some conservative circles, are like red flags. But do the charges hold up? On inspection, the evidence for each is decidedly mixed.

While Bush's policies do seem to have benefited large corporations, small-business owners have not been complaining. To the contrary, they have loudly applauded his tax cuts and his support for litigation reform, and, according to the National Federation of Independent Business, they are more optimistic about economic conditions today than at any time in the past 30 years. On trade, it is true that Bush has pursued imperfect regional agreements (just as Reagan himself initiated a bilateral U.S.-Canada agreement) in lieu of multilateral pacts. But Bartlett barely acknowledges the unwillingness of the European Union to lower its own agricultural subsidies—a central obstacle to freer global trade. Finally, while Bartlett offers anecdotal evidence that earlier Treasury departments were more thorough in their vetting procedures, he seems to have forgotten the improvisational nature of some of Reagan's economic policies. David Stockman, the chief of the Office of Management and Budget in the first Reagan term, would famously recall how he and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger arbitrarily arrived at cuts in the defense budget while locked in negotiations.

Indeed, Bartlett's analysis is altogether reminiscent of the sky-is-falling tenor of Stockman's 1986 memoir, *The Triumph of Politics*, written after he resigned as White House budget director and bearing the subtitle, "How the Reagan Revolution Failed." Stockman believed that Reagan's unwillingness to cut spending doomed future generations to fiscal peril. In *Impostor*, Bartlett makes a similar argument. His own agent of impending calamity is the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003, passed by Re-

publicans at the insistence of the President and, by Bartlett's lights, the "worst legislation in history."

THE 2003 bill created, for the first time, a prescription-drug benefit as part of the Medicare entitlement program, which until then had provided reimbursement only for hospital care and doctors' visits. As a matter of public policy, analysts had long decried the anomaly of a program that paid for expensive bypass surgery but not for the far less costly statin medicines that can help prevent heart attacks in the first place. As a political matter, many also believed that this was an opportunity Republicans could not pass up; Democrats had been successfully exploiting the issue for partisan gain since Reagan's time.

Dismissing the claims of a political upside to Bush's move, Bartlett focuses instead on how the initial projections for prescription-drug coverage had vastly underestimated the program's long-term costs. Since then, the Medicare Trustees, an independent group, has raised its own long-term estimates still further, projecting, over the next 75 years, more than \$8 trillion in drug entitlements with no funding source in sight. Hence Bartlett's view that, absent drastic reductions in benefits, only higher taxes can avert fiscal disaster.

It is certainly true that, so far, the legislation has brought Bush little political benefit. Moreover, implementation of the plan beginning this past January has been so rocky, leaving some of the most financially vulnerable seniors without their prescription medicine, as to overshadow all else. Nor do most health-care actuaries and budget experts disagree with Bartlett that longer-term costs are the real problem.

The same goes for the many conservative activists who have echoed Bartlett's arguments. Stephen Moore, until recently the head of the Club for Growth, a fundraising organization for free-market political candidates, said that his group could not "in good conscience support [this] largest entitlement expansion in decades." Former House majority leader Dick Armey declared that "the conservative, free-market base in America is rightly in revolt over" the plan. *The Wall Street Journal* described the legislation as a "Medicare fiasco."

And yet it must be said that there is something peculiar about these cries of alarm from veteran Washington observers. The unfunded liability of the entire Medicare program has not exactly been a secret. Although the addition of a drug benefit certainly compounds the problem, it has hardly created a substantially new one.

The liability of the drug benefit over the next 75 years is estimated at \$8.7 trillion; the liability of the hospital and doctor-visit components of the Medicare program already in place is nearly three times that figure. In the words of Gail Wilensky, a former head of the federal Medicare and Medicaid programs, “this is not a fundamentally different problem.” The real debate concerns how Congress should eventually contain the costs: through regulation and price controls, or through market mechanisms and means testing. It is long past time for that desperately needed debate to begin, and the addition of a prescription-drug benefit—which was bound to occur at some point or other—will surely hasten it.

There is, besides, good news in the drug bill itself. Among its provisions are three significant reforms that conservatives have been advocating for years but that have received scant attention from Bush’s critics. The first is the creation of health savings accounts for seniors, which give individuals far greater control over their spending decisions. The second allows private-sector insurance companies to compete in offering seniors their choice of drug-coverage plans. This has already shown more impressive results than predicted: in late January, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the new Medicare benefit had sparked “a competitive scramble in the health-insurance industry,” with companies vying to lower costs.

The third reform is both the most overlooked and the most important. Starting in 2007, high-income seniors will see their Medicare subsidies for doctor visits drop from 75 percent to 20 percent of the bill. That the federal government should have been providing any Medicare subsidy at all to wealthy retirees is a puzzle unto itself, but the short answer is that Democrats in Congress have fiercely resisted any significant reform of the benefit structure of Medicare that might change its status as a universal entitlement. Therein lies precisely the value of this reduction. It advances a long-sought conservative goal—beginning to wean the wealthiest seniors from taxpayer-funded coverage—and sets a precedent for battles yet to come.

If, indeed, conservatives are ever to achieve a fundamental reform of Medicare through means testing and market competition, they will inevitably have to build on the changes introduced in this bill. That many of Bush’s conservative critics have failed to grasp this simple truth is a telling comment on the degree to which their narrow focus on the raw dollar amounts of government spending has blinded them to their own ideological interests.

**I**NTRODUCING INCREMENTAL conservative reforms into big-government programs has become, in fact, something of a hallmark of George W. Bush’s brand of governance. Two years ago in these pages, I argued that he was, in piecemeal fashion, offering up what amounted to a new version of conservatism.<sup>2</sup> Rather than focusing on the sheer size of the federal government, he was focusing on outcomes and how to produce them.

Thus, in education, he supported a costly spending bill in exchange for establishing a hitherto unheard-of emphasis on testing at the state level. To alleviate poverty, he set out to harness the work of the faith community as a complement to, if not a substitute for, the work of welfare bureaucracies. To reform Social Security, he proposed a gradual—and again costly—transition to private retirement-savings accounts. To reform Medicare by encouraging more Americans to choose individual health-savings accounts with high deductibles will likewise be costly, requiring deficit-ballooning tax incentives that, according to the latest budget, are projected to deprive the government of \$60 billion in revenue over the next five years.

To be sure, Bush has still not succeeded in delivering on many of his proposals. Nor, despite the use of inadequate slogans like “compassionate conservatism” or “the ownership society,” has he ever presented them as constituent elements of a coherent philosophy. To the contrary, his advocacy of import restrictions on steel, and the Department of Energy spending initiatives announced in his latest State of the Union address, smack more of liberal industrial policy than of any conservative aim. In that sense, it is hardly surprising that some conservatives are as bewildered as they are angry.

In a welcome new book, Fred Barnes of the *Weekly Standard* has set out to remedy the lack of a consistent thread to Bush’s proposals while countering the “bickering and grouching” of discontented conservatives.<sup>3</sup> According to Barnes, Bush has achieved something for everyone in the Republican coalition: supply-side tax cuts, an idealistic foreign policy, the concept of private accounts for Social Security, the appointment of strict constructionists to the federal bench, staunch opposition to abortion and gay marriage. Is there a philosophy in this smorgasbord of policies? Barnes argues that there is: “coherence rests with the three words and one institution that sum up Bush conservatism. The

<sup>2</sup> “Is Bush a Conservative?,” February 2004.

<sup>3</sup> *Rebel-in-Chief: How George W. Bush Is Redefining the Conservative Movement and Transforming America*. Crown Forum, 224 pp., \$23.95.

words are choice, accountability, and freedom. The institution is a strong national government.”

Barnes’s pithy formulation is unlikely to satisfy the angry conservatives, or to silence calls for small government. But it does convey accurately enough the direction of “Bush conservatism”—and it does undeniably comport with political reality. As unpalatable as it may be for some conservatives, the fact of the matter is that reducing the size of government no longer resonates with Americans as it once did. In 1996, when a *Washington Post* survey asked respondents if they favored smaller government providing fewer services, 63 percent said yes; by mid-2004, the proportion had fallen to 50 percent.

Does this mean, as Bush’s critics contend, that thanks to him the Reagan revolution really has failed? Hardly: the declining place of “small government” in the list of public priorities needs to be seen in the twin context of conservative triumphs over the past 25 years and the arrival of new anxieties—terrorism, homeland security, retirement, health care—that are unavoidably the province of “strong national government.” Advising Republicans to raise again the fallen banner of small government is thus no recipe for success, ideological or political. “Just as socialism [is] no longer the guiding goal for the Left,” wrote the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks on the eve of the Republican national convention in 2004, “reducing the size of government cannot be the governing philosophy for the next generation of conservatives.”

There are other pitfalls as well in concentrating on the ways in which Bush falls short of the Reaganite ideal of conservatism. In the first place, it overlooks the many other ways in which he is *more* conservative than Reagan. Take, for instance, gay marriage, stem-cell research, and cloning—contentious moral issues that never confronted Reagan, that are fraught with political risk, and on which Bush has adopted clear and consistently conservative positions. He has also been arguably more active than Reagan when it comes to proposing and defending conservative nominees to the federal bench. Although they have not yet met with success, his proposals for private accounts in Social Security, a permanent end to the estate tax, and market-oriented health-care reforms as outlined in this year’s State of the Union address bring conservative ideas into policy realms never explored during the Reagan era. In the area of national security, he has expanded the homeland-security apparatus and been unhesitant about using executive-branch powers to track suspected domestic terrorist activities. In foreign policy, his uncompromising deter-

mination to defeat global terrorism has led him to be much less sparing in the use of force than Reagan ever was.

Nor, speaking of pitfalls, should one forget that Reagan’s two terms in office were full of contradictions of their own. Reagan’s speeches may have excoriated Congress for its failure to send him balanced budgets, but his (admirable) build-up of defense expenditures made such a balanced budget impossible. His embrace of supply-side tax cuts was countered by the tax increases he signed in 1982—at the time, the largest in American history. Reagan also did not hesitate to spend more to help favored industries like agriculture and timber.

**T**O PURISTS, the principles of conservative thought are immutable. But the last quarter-century disproves this notion, too. Reagan’s own success was due in large part to his willingness to shake off conservative orthodoxies that had persisted since the Harding administration. Unlike his predecessors, Reagan never expressed an open hostility to the New Deal; he undertook his tax cuts even though they were anathema to balanced-budget conservatives; and he was undeterred by old-fashioned Republican scruples when it came to deficit spending. Fourteen years later, Newt Gingrich’s Contract with America once more shook up the conservative agenda, introducing term limits, welfare reform, and tort reform as top legislative priorities. At the same time, Gingrich gave speeches about smart environmental regulation and market-driven health care, issues once thought to be the exclusive preserve of the Democratic party.

In their very useful history of conservative politics in America, the British journalists Adrian Wooldridge and John Micklethwait point to the distinguishing feature of recent conservative thinking: in line with its electoral successes, it has moved from a reactive to a “preemptive” mode.<sup>4</sup> Since Reagan, conservatives have no longer been content to restrain liberal tendencies. Instead, they have, if in a sometimes erratic way, striven to build a new governing agenda. This, too, Bush has done.

What remains true, of course, and what even those who vigorously applaud his agenda must concede, is that his many failures of execution along the way have damaged the movement’s ability to build a confident political coalition. The “enduring mystery about the Bush administration,” wrote David Frum last fall, “has been the strange disparity between the boldness of the President’s strate-

<sup>4</sup> *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*. Penguin, 464 pp., \$25.95.

gies and the extreme caution of his tactics.” The result has been to impede the formation of a working alliance in a manner analogous to Reagan’s uniting of Christian fundamentalists, libertarians, foreign-policy hawks, and business leaders. The most conspicuous evidence of this failure is the fact that, after five years in office, Bush lacks any clearly identified, high-level surrogates who can publicly make his case for him or even claim to speak for the “Bush wing” of the Republican party. On Sunday-morning talk shows, Republican spokesmen—one thinks of Senator John McCain of Arizona, or Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska—are as likely to be White House critics as supporters.

WILL FUTURE Republican candidates be running on platforms that endorse, or that repudiate, George W. Bush’s mix of an ambitious foreign policy and strong-government conservatism? More specifically, will any of the GOP candidates for President in 2008 be running as a “George W. Bush Republican”? And if so, what would that mean? In answering such questions, political reporters, who over the last decades have tended to categorize Republicans as either “conservative” or “moderate”—usually according to a politician’s position on abortion—will have their work cut out for them.

So far, in any case, none of the potential candidates can be quickly identified as either a “Reagan” or a “Bush” Republican. McCain, for example, who describes himself as pro-life, voted against both the Medicare drug bill and the 2001 Bush tax cuts; he has also been the leading voice in favor of campaign-finance legislation, a cause disdained by most conservatives. Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, another potential contender, promotes himself as an “economic hawk” but has spoken out forcefully against gay marriage. Former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who continues to tease the press with hints of a run, has a long record of support for both abortion and gay rights, even as his tenure as mayor showed him to be an intractable opponent of liberal bureaucracy and the welfare-state mentality of urban Democrats. Other possible candidates, including Senator George Allen of Virginia and Senate majority leader Bill Frist, have similarly mixed views. Both Allen and Frist voted for Bush’s expansion of Medicare and the funding for Hurricane Katrina relief, but in foreign policy and other areas neither of them can readily be identified as a “Bush” conservative.

Still, they, and others, may have to learn to become such conservatives, especially if they mean to anticipate and preempt the arguments of Hillary Clinton or another Democratic nominee in 2008. The challenge facing Republicans is to find and articulate conservative solutions to what are fundamentally exercises in big government: immigration, Social Security, response to emergency, homeland security, health care and other entitlements, and the like. For many conservatives who cut their political teeth during the Reagan era, all this is unfamiliar territory—but as the free-market advocate James Glassman discovered when he visited New Orleans in early January, it may also be the most promising territory of all.

In common with many conservatives, Glassman was convinced that the billions requested by the administration to help rebuild the city were bound to lead to another fiasco of wasteful federal largesse. But once the money for reconstructing the levees had been committed, a new playing field was created, as policy makers came face to face with, in Glassman’s words, a “leap into the unknown.” True, the old predictable cadres were there, working alongside Mayor Ray Nagin to mobilize all the available instruments of centralized government planning and the fat bureaucracies that would implement them. But so were all sorts of resourceful and enterprising types who had been drawn by the near-destruction of a major American city to something that was beginning to look more and more like “a project in free-market creativity.” Glassman left New Orleans convinced that the city was brimming with entrepreneurial potential.

The conservative movement is likely to face many more leaps into the unknown in the years ahead, each of them requiring market-oriented solutions built alongside, or embedded within, federal spending programs. Failure to seize the opportunities they present, out of blind obedience to the conviction that government is the problem, will mean ceding the ground to the central planners who still dominate the Democratic party. The “Bush revolution” may still not have fully taken off, but if the Republican party is truly to remain the party of ideas, then it has no choice but to embrace and explain a “preemptive” program modeled more or less along the lines that Bush has laid out. If it is to succeed, that program should always remain cognizant of the ideals Ronald Reagan pursued in launching the modern conservative era 25 years ago. But it need not be bounded by them, either.