



FPRI The Case for Reassessing America's 43rd President

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Abstract: Contemporary judgments of George W. Bush's foreign policy were often quite harsh and polemical. In this article, we argue that a moderate form of Bush revisionism is likely to emerge in the coming years, as scholars take a more dispassionate look at his achievements in global affairs and the difficult circumstances under which his administration labored. We offer the six most persuasive arguments in favor of Bush revisionism; we then discuss the most reasonable critiques of these arguments. The overall thrust of this essay is not that Bush will someday be seen as one of America's most successful statesmen, but simply that his reputation should improve as partisan passions fade and new evidence is considered.

Every unpopular president fancies himself a latter-day Harry Truman.¹ When Truman's presidency concluded in 1953, his foreign policy often was derided by contemporary observers. By the early 1990s, however, Truman's tenure was widely seen as a veritable golden age of American statecraft—a time when a successful Cold War strategy took shape and Washington erected the modern international system. As his own presidency ended, George W. Bush clearly aspired to similar historiographical rehabilitation. He repeatedly invoked Truman's example, implying that history and hindsight would eventually vindicate his own policies, as well.²

Such vindication would certainly represent a remarkable reversal in assessments of Bush's statecraft. Bush left office with his approval ratings in the

¹ A longer version of this essay will be published as Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, "The Case for Bush Revisionism: Reevaluating the Legacy of America's 43rd President," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, forthcoming.

² See, for instance, George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010), pp. 174-175. The work that best represented Truman's rehabilitation was David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

twenties, and his harshest detractors had accused him of lying his way into a disastrous war in Iraq and other near-criminal misdeeds. “There are bad foreign policy presidents,” wrote one journalist, “and then there is George W. Bush.”³ Even less polemical analysts alleged that Bush had pursued an overly aggressive, unilateral foreign policy, one that was characterized by myriad costly failures—most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan—and a dearth of meaningful diplomatic successes. According to a 2008 poll, 98.2 percent of historians deemed Bush’s presidency a failure, with 61 percent calling it the worst in American history.⁴



President George W. Bush

But presidential reputations change over time, as partisan passions fade and new sources become available. Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan were both maligned as intellectual lightweights and ineffectual leaders by many contemporaries; subsequently both have come to be seen—in some quarters, at least—as skillful helmsmen who steered America through treacherous passages in the Cold War. The historical record on George W. Bush’s foreign policy has now begun to emerge, as memoirs, oral histories, and other primary sources, as well as thoughtful accounts by scholars and journalists have become available. So will we see “Bush revisionism” in the years ahead?

The answer, we believe, is a partial—and provisional—yes. A final judgment on Bush’s policies will not be rendered for many years, and perhaps not even then. But even now, there is cause to think that Bush’s historical reputation will improve. Indeed, in this essay, we offer and appraise the six most powerful arguments that

³ Michael Cohen, “The Best and Worst Foreign Policy Presidents of the Past Century,” *The Atlantic*, July 30, 2011.

⁴ “HNN Poll: 61% of Historians Rate the Bush Presidency Worst,” *History News Network*, Nov. 6, 2008, <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/48916>. For a critical assessment of presidential historians and Bush, see Stephen E. Knott, *Rush to Judgement: George W. Bush, The War on Terror, and His Critics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012).

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