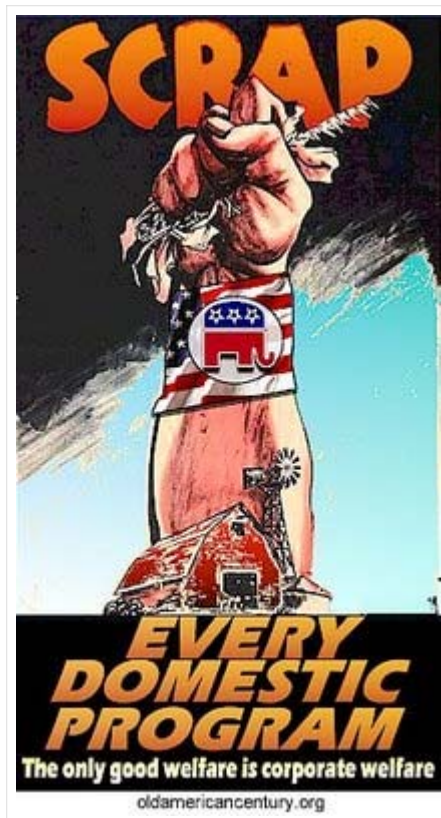


THOMAS PAINE'S CORNER

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THURSDAY, AUGUST 10, 2006

So you think Bush is just a bumbling idiot?



Just look at a few of his accomplishments.

by **George Lakoff, Marc Ettliger and Sam Ferguson**

8/10/06

Progressives have fallen into a trap. Emboldened by President Bush's plummeting approval ratings, progressives increasingly point to Bush's "failures" and label him and his administration as incompetent. For example, Nancy Pelosi said "The situation in Iraq and the reckless economic policies in the United States speak to one issue for me, and that is the competence of our leader." Self-satisfying as this criticism may be, it misses the bigger point. Bush's disasters — Katrina, the Iraq War, the

ABOUT ME



JASON MILLER
KANSAS CITY
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STATES

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budget deficit — are not so much a testament to his incompetence or a failure of execution. Rather, they are the natural, even inevitable result of his conservative governing philosophy. It is conservatism itself, carried out according to plan, that is at fault. Bush will not be running again, but other conservatives will. His governing philosophy is theirs as well. We should be putting the onus where it belongs, on all conservative office holders and candidates who would lead us off the same cliff.

To Bush's base, his bumbling folksiness is part of his charm — it fosters conservative populism. Bush plays up this image by proudly stating his lack of interest in reading and current events, his fondness for naps and vacations and his self-deprecating jokes. This image causes the opposition to underestimate his capacities — disregarding him as a complete idiot — and deflects criticism of his conservative allies. If incompetence is the problem, it's all about Bush. But, if conservatism is the problem, it is about a set of ideas, a movement and its many adherents.

The idea that Bush is incompetent is a curious one. Consider the following (incomplete) list of major initiatives the Bush administration, with a loyal conservative Congress, has accomplished:

Centralizing power in the executive branch to an unprecedented degree

the executive branch to an

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Starting two major wars, one started with questionable intelligence and in a manner with which the military disagreed

Placing on the Supreme Court two far-right justices, and stacking the lower federal courts with many more

Cutting taxes during wartime, an unprecedented event

Passing a number of controversial bills such as the PATRIOT Act, the No Child Left Behind Act, the Medicare Drug bill, the Bankruptcy bill and a number of massive tax cuts

Rolling back and refusing to enforce a host of basic regulatory protections

Appointing industry officials to oversee regulatory agencies

Establishing a greater role for religion through faith-based

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initiatives

Passing Orwellian-titled legislation assaulting the environment — "The Healthy Forests Act" and the "Clear Skies Initiative" — to deforest public lands, and put more pollution in our skies

Winning re-election and solidifying his party's grip on Congress

These aren't signs of incompetence. As should be painfully clear, the Bush administration has been overwhelmingly competent in advancing its conservative vision. It has been all too effective in achieving its goals by determinedly pursuing a conservative philosophy.

It's not Bush the man who has been so harmful, it's the conservative agenda.

The Conservative Agenda

Conservative philosophy has three fundamental tenets: individual initiative, that is, government's positive role in people's lives outside of the military and police should be minimized; the President is the moral authority; and free markets are enough to foster freedom and opportunity.

The conservative vision for government is to shrink it — to "starve the beast" in Conservative Grover Norquist's words. The conservative tagline for this rationale is that "you can spend your money better than the government can." Social programs are considered unnecessary or "discretionary" since the primary role of government is to defend the country's border and police its interior. Stewardship of the commons, such as allocation of healthcare or energy policy, is left to people's own initiative within the free market. Where profits cannot be made — conservation, healthcare for the poor — charity is meant to replace justice and the government should not be involved.

Given this philosophy, then, is it any wonder that the government wasn't there for the residents of Louisiana and Mississippi in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina? Conservative philosophy places emphasis on the individual acting alone, independent of anything the government could provide. Some conservative Sunday morning talk show guests suggested that those who chose to live in New Orleans accepted the risk of a devastating hurricane, the implication being that they thus forfeited any entitlement to government assistance. If the people of New Orleans suffered, it

was because of their own actions, their own choices and their own lack of preparedness. Bush couldn't have failed if he bore no responsibility.

The response to Hurricane Katrina — rather, the lack of response — was what one should expect from a philosophy that espouses that the government can have no positive role in its citizen's lives. This response was not about Bush's incompetence, it was a conservative, shrink-government response to a natural disaster.

Another failure of this administration during the Katrina fiasco was its wholesale disregard of the numerous and serious hurricane warnings. But this failure was a natural outgrowth of the conservative insistence on denying the validity of global warming, not ineptitude. Conservatives continue to deny the validity of global warming, because it runs contrary to their moral system. Recognizing global warming would call for environmental regulation and governmental efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Regulation is a perceived interference with the free-market, Conservatives' golden calf. So, the predictions of imminent hurricanes — based on recognizing global warming — were not heeded. Conservative free market convictions trumped the hurricane warnings.

Our budget deficit is not the result of incompetent fiscal management. It too is an outgrowth of conservative philosophy. What better way than massive deficits to rid social programs of their funding?

In Iraq, we also see the impact of philosophy as much as a failure of execution.

The idea for the war itself was born out of deep conservative convictions about the nature and capacity of US military force. Among the Project for a New American Century's statement of principles (signed in 1997 by a who's who of the architects of the Iraq war — Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Zalmay Khalilzad, I. Lewis Libby among others) are four critical points:

we need to increase defense spending significantly if we are to carry out our global responsibilities today and modernize our armed forces for the future

we need to strengthen our ties to democratic allies and to challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values

we need to promote the cause of political and economic freedom abroad

we need to accept responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles.

Implicit in these ideas is that the United States military can spread democracy through the barrel of a gun. Our military might and power can be a force for good.

It also indicates that the real motive behind the Iraq war wasn't to stop Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, but was a test of neoconservative theory that the US military could reshape Middle East geo-politics. The manipulation and disregard of intelligence to sell the war was not incompetence, it was the product of a conservative agenda.

Unfortunately, this theory exalts a hubristic vision over the lessons of history. It neglects the realization that there is a limit to a foreign army's ability to shape foreign politics for the good. Our military involvement in Vietnam, Lebanon, the Philippines, Cuba (prior to Castro) and Panama, or European imperialist endeavors around the globe should have taught us this lesson. Democracy needs to be an organic, homegrown movement, as it was in this country. If we believe so deeply in our ideals, they will speak for themselves and inspire others.

During the debate over Iraq, the conservative belief in the unquestioned authority and moral leadership of the President helped shape public support. We see this deference to the President constantly: when Conservatives call those questioning the President's military decisions "unpatriotic"; when Conservatives defend the executive branch's use of domestic spying in the war on terror; when Bush simply refers to himself as the "decider." "I support our President" was a common justification of assent to the Iraq policy.

Additionally, as the implementer of the neoconservative vision and an unquestioned moral authority, our President felt he had no burden to forge international consensus or listen to the critiques of our allies. "You're with us, or you're against us," he proclaimed after 9/11.

Much criticism continues to be launched against this administration for ineptitude in its reconstruction efforts. Tragically, it is here too that the administration's actions have

been shaped less by ineptitude than by deeply held conservative

convictions about the role of government.

As noted above, Conservatives believe that government's role is limited to security and maintaining a free market. Given this conviction, it's no accident that administration policies have focused almost exclusively on the training of Iraqi police, and US access to the newly free Iraqi market — the invisible hand of the market will take care of the rest. Indeed, George Packer has recently reported that the reconstruction effort in Iraq is nearing its end ("The Lessons of Tal Affar," *The New Yorker*, April 10th, 2006). Iraqis must find ways to rebuild themselves, and the free market we have constructed for them is supposed to do this. This is not ineptitude. This is the result of deep convictions over the nature of freedom and the responsibilities of governments to their people.

Finally, many of the miscalculations are the result of a conservative analytic focus on narrow causes and effects, rather than mere incompetence. Evidence for this focus can be seen in conservative domestic policies: Crime policy is based on punishing the criminals, independent of any effort to remedy the larger social issues that cause crime; immigration policy focuses on border issues and the immigrants, and ignores the effects of international and domestic economic policy on [population migration](#); environmental policy is based on what profits there are to be gained or lost today, without attention paid to what the immeasurable long-term costs will be to the shared resource of our environment; education policy, in the form of vouchers, ignores the devastating effects that dismantling the public school system will have on our whole society.

Is it any surprise that the systemic impacts of the Iraq invasion were not part of the conservative moral or strategic calculus used in pursuing the war?

The conservative war rhetoric focused narrowly on ousting Saddam — he was an evil dictator, and evil cannot be tolerated, period. The moral implications of unleashing social chaos and collateral damage in addition to the lessons of history were not relevant concerns.

As a consequence, we expected to be greeted as liberators. The conservative plan failed to appreciate the complexities of the situation that would have called for broader contingency planning. It lacked an analysis of what else would happen in Iraq and the Middle East as a result of ousting the Hussein

Government, such as an Iranian push to obtain nuclear weapons.

Joe Biden recently said, "if I had known the president was going to be this incompetent in his administration, I would not have given him the authority [to go to war]." Had Bush actually been incompetent, he would have never been able to lead us to war in Iraq. Had Bush been incompetent, he would not have been able to ram through hundreds of billions of dollars in tax cuts. Had Bush been incompetent, he would have been blocked from stacking the courts with right-wing judges. Incompetence, on reflection, might have actually been better for the country.

Hidden Successes

Perhaps the biggest irony of the Bush-is-incompetent frame is that these "failures" — Iraq, Katrina and the budget deficit — have been successes in terms of advancing the conservative agenda.

One of the goals of Conservatives is to keep people from relying on the federal government. Under Bush, FEMA was reorganized to no longer be a first responder in major natural disasters, but to provide support for local agencies. This led to the disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina. Now citizens, as well as local and state governments, have become distrustful of the federal government's capacity to help ordinary citizens. Though Bush's popularity may have suffered, enhancing the perception of federal government as inept turned out to be a conservative victory.

Conservatives also strive to get rid of protective agencies and social programs. The deficit Bush created through irresponsible tax cuts and a costly war in Iraq will require drastic budget cuts to remedy. Those cuts, conservatives know, won't come from military spending, particularly when they raise the constant specter of war. Instead, the cuts will be from what Conservatives have begun to call "non-military, discretionary spending;" that is, the programs that contribute to the common good like the FDA, EPA, FCC, FEMA, OSHA and the NLRB. Yet another success for the conservative agenda.

Both Iraq and Katrina have enriched the coffers of the conservative corporate elite, thus further advancing the conservative agenda. Halliburton, Lockheed Martin and US oil companies have enjoyed huge profit margins in the last six years. Taking Iraq's oil production off-line in the face of rising international demand meant prices would rise, making the oil

inventories of Exxon and other firms that much more valuable,

leading to record profits. The destruction wrought by Katrina and Iraq meant billions in reconstruction contracts. The war in Iraq (and the war in Afghanistan) meant billions in military equipment contracts. Was there any doubt where those contracts would go? Chalk up another success for Bush's conservative agenda.

Bush also used Katrina as an opportunity to suspend the environmental and labor protection laws that Conservatives despise so much. In the wake of Katrina, environmental standards for oil refineries were temporarily suspended to increase production. Labor laws are being thwarted to drive down the cost of reconstruction efforts. So, amidst these "disasters," Conservatives win again.

Where most Americans see failure in Iraq – George Miller recently called Iraq a "blunder of historic proportions" – conservative militarists are seeing many successes. Conservatives stress the importance of our military – our national pride and worth is expressed through its power and influence. Permanent bases are being constructed as planned in Iraq, and America has shown the rest of the world that we can and will preemptively strike with little provocation.

They succeeded in a mobilization of our military forces based on ideological pretenses to impact foreign policy. The war has struck fear in other nations with a hostile show of American power. The conservatives have succeeded in strengthening what they perceive to be the locus of the national interest – military power.

It's NOT Incompetence

When Progressives shout "Incompetence!" it obscures the many conservative successes. The incompetence frame drastically misses the point, that the conservative vision is doing great harm to this country and the world. An understanding of this and an articulate progressive response is needed. Progressives know that government can and should have a positive role in our lives beyond simple, physical security. It had a positive impact during the progressive era, busting trusts, and establishing basic labor standards. It had a positive impact during the new deal, softening the blow of the depression by creating jobs and stimulating the economy. It had a positive role in advancing the civil rights movement, extending rights to previously disenfranchised groups. And the United States can have a positive role in world affairs without the use of its military and expressions of raw

power. Progressives acknowledge that we are all in this together,

with "we" meaning all people, across all spectrums of race, class, religion, sex, sexual preference and age. "We" also means across party lines, state lines and international borders.

The mantra of incompetence has been an unfortunate one. The incompetence frame assumes that there was a sound plan, and that the trouble has been in the execution. It turns public debate into a referendum on Bush's management capabilities, and deflects a critique of the impact of his guiding philosophy. It also leaves open the possibility that voters will opt for another radically conservative president in 2008, so long as he or she can manage better. Bush will not be running again, so thinking, talking and joking about him being incompetent offers no lessons to draw from his presidency.

Incompetence obscures the real issue. Bush's conservative philosophy is what has damaged this country and it is his philosophy of conservatism that must be rejected, whoever endorses it.

Conservatism itself is the villain that is harming our people, destroying our environment, and weakening our nation. Conservatives are undermining American values through legislation almost every day. This message applies to every conservative bill proposed to Congress. The issue that arises every day is which philosophy of governing should shape our country. It is the issue of our times. Unless conservative philosophy itself is discredited, Conservatives will continue their domination of public discourse, and with it, will continue their domination of politics.

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POSTED BY JASON MILLER AT 3:49 PM

14 COMMENTS:

Anonymous said...

Bush is an idiot. He is incompetent. You are describing the

accomplishments of Dick Cheney and HIS administration.

Jesse Richard - Editor, TvNewsLIES.org

[Click here to visit TvNewsLIES.org](#)

FRI AUG 11, 08:30:02 AM PDT

Anonymous said...

You should really ask Cui Bono? By this measure those who profit are competent, those who lose are prey...

http://rossco.org/Darwin_Reconsidered.pdf

FRI AUG 11, 01:23:21 PM PDT

Tera said...

I am sorry to tell you this, but Bush IS an idiot! And he is not a Christian either! He has fostered hatred in the world: cultures toward each other AND especially toward America and Americans. Those of us who have had Muslim friends even, and would have liked to travel and see the rest of our planet are now afraid to do so, thanks specifically to him and his administration. He has also caused the cold-blooded slaughter of many innocent people! Do you really think that this is compassionate, or even wise?? He should have at least been wise enough to know that "an eye for an eye and the whole world goes blind." But HE IS NOT. Not only this, but to make matters worse, he exploited this war, and these people for profit, as well!

FRI AUG 11, 02:03:05 PM PDT

Anonymous said...

Anyone that can get a college degree without any effort, get credit for military service & not ever having been there, never been charged with AWOL, become president for two terms without the required votes, Bush must have something going for him. He doesn't seem too bright. In fact his verbal skills sound like a serious mental stutter. I sure don't get it. Must be someone he knows.

FRI AUG 11, 02:12:49 PM PDT

Anonymous said...

.....yah, his father.

FRI AUG 11, 02:53:10 PM PDT

Darkplanet said...

I feel a bit like I'm beating a dead horse here but it's pretty plain to anyone paying attention that Bush is really just a talking head. Oh sure I have no doubt he "thinks he's in power" but the fact of the matter is that he is being "handled". Much like you handle a

pop star or an actor with a drug problem. To further the Cheney, Rove agenda they needed just this kind of brainless, cocaine fried fratboy to carry out their middle eastern power grab. I think the debate regarding whether or not Bush has a brain has long since passed. Those who pull the strings don't even try to hide anymore really. You only need look with a clear head and open eyes at the facts. Only the most extremest, rightwing lunatics rush to his defense these days.

FRI AUG 11, 02:59:45 PM PDT

Anonymous said...

Sorry, but you're missing the point and have fallen into the classic hegelian trap. Let's examine the words of Benito Mussilini, himself: "Fascism reasserts the rights of the State as expressing the real essence of the individual And if liberty is to be the attribute of living men and not of abstract dummies invented by individualistic liberalism, then Fascism stands for liberty, and for the only liberty worth having, the liberty of the State and of the individual within the State The Fascist conception of the State is all embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist, much less have value. Thus understood, Fascism, is totalitarian, and the Fascist State - a synthesis and a unit inclusive of all values - interprets, develops, and potentates the whole life of a people." The Bush regeime has nothing to do with conservative, but is fascist in nature.

FRI AUG 11, 03:04:50 PM PDT

Shawn said...

I cannot agree with your assessment of Bush. I do believe him to be a human vegetable. However, his handlers are extemely intelligent, and also extremely dangerous. They have indeed accomplished a great many of their objectives. However, they haven't necessarily achieved these goals through intelligence, rather, by dishonesty, complete disregard for the law, and intimidation. They have used the U.S. military to suppress other nations objecting to their cause, and, frankly, used the stupidity (or rather gullibility) of groups such as "Christians" in this country to achieve their ends. You mention "Conservative morals or morality" several times. These folks are neither "conservatives" nor do they have any morals. Traditional conservatives, such as Paul Craig Roberts, John Dean, Bob Barr, have long ago jumped ship from the standards set by these **CRIMINALS**. The bottom line, these folks are fascists and wish to rule over everyone that doesn't fit into their "group." They care about nothing but themselves, piss on the rest of humanity.

FRI AUG 11, 03:09:58 PM PDT

Anonymous said...

Bill Clinton called himself a "virtual President" and made it very clear in an interview that someone else makes the choices for you and you just stand there and smile or shake hands while the real people behind the curtain are the ones working 24/7 for the banks and doing their very best to keep them happy.

Lucifer bless America.

Hail Satan.

FRI AUG 11, 03:17:02 PM PDT

Anonymous said...

Bill Clinton was the best president the US had in years.

FRI AUG 11, 03:32:39 PM PDT

foist lastus said...

mush and brainy

billy is a good actor, he even plays saxophone

FRI AUG 11, 04:56:55 PM PDT

Anonymous said...

Dear fellow posters,

Seems like the writers message is to discredit the "conservative vision.

The conservatives gave our once proud "liberal" badge a bad image.

Just how did they do that?

Figure that out and you can do the same.

Can you start today?

A well written piece. Than you sirs. Comeback soon with more!

Chris

PS

Bush did not want the DHS. Liberman came up with the plan and Bush finally gave in.

PSS

Please no more qualifying if Bush is a shrub or not.

We have been missing the point for years!

Anonymous said...

Why did my first post not get posted? Was it snatched by our government friends?

FRI AUG 11, 05:27:57 PM PDT

T said...

Very well said. Although it is apparent that some readers are bent on arguing, you did a good job of explaining how the "Conservative Republican Agenda" appears to be fascist and criminal, on the level of your point of view. While, on the level of most people's viewpoint, it appears that Bush is incompetent. I did not for a minute think that you were stating that the "fascist agenda" is wise, moral or spiritual. I think it is unfortunate that many of your reader's viewpoints are bent on arguing. I am not even saying that I agree with you in terms of me being progressive or conservative. I just think it was a well stated viewpoint that I'm glad to be able to consider.

FRI AUG 11, 06:10:13 PM PDT

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