

BUSH

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Distinguished presidential biographer Jean Edward Smith offers a “comprehensive and compelling” (*The New York Times*) life of George W. Bush, showing how he ignored his advisors to make key decisions himself—most disastrously in invading Iraq—and how these decisions were often driven by the President’s deep religious faith.

George W. Bush, the forty-third president of the United States, almost singlehandedly decided to invade Iraq. It was possibly the worst foreign-policy decision ever made by a president. The consequences dominated the Bush Administration and still haunt us today.

In *Bush*, a “well-rounded portrait...necessary and valuable in this election year” (*Christian Science Monitor*), Jean Edward Smith demonstrates that it was not Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, or Condoleezza Rice, but President Bush himself who took personal control of foreign policy. Bush drew on his deep religious conviction that important foreign-policy decisions were simply a matter of good versus evil. Domestically, he overreacted to 9/11 and endangered Americans’ civil liberties. Smith explains that it wasn’t until the financial crisis of 2008 that Bush finally accepted expert advice. As a result, he authorized decisions that saved the economy from possible collapse, even though some of those decisions violated Bush’s own political philosophy.

“An excellent initial assessment of a presidency that began in controversy...and ended with the international and domestic failures that saddled Bush with the most sustained negative ratings of any modern president” (*Dallas Morning News*), this comprehensive evaluation will surely surprise many readers. “Written in sober, smooth, snark-free prose, with an air of thoughtful, detached authority, the book is nonetheless exceedingly damning in its judgments about George W. Bush’s years in office” (*The Washington Post*).

Bush Details

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From Reader Review Bush for online ebook

Jerome says

A readable, well-written and critical biography of George W. Bush, who comes off as an amiable, decent person who heeded bad advice and made both sound and terrible decisions, although Smith does not claim any special insight into what made Bush tick. The narrative is brisk and flows well, especially when it comes to the 9/11 attacks, and is mostly focused on his presidency.

Smith's Bush comes off as naive and misguided in some ways, as well as gracious, savvy and personable in others; Smith does a great job describing Bush's character, and argues that, despite some nuances, he didn't much in the way of a hidden side. Bush here comes off as more of a "delegator" than a "decider." Smith describes the varying influence of Bush's advisers, and disputes the idea that Cheney was some sort of puppet master; Smith is surprisingly easy on Rumsfeld. Smith also describes Bush's drinking and his sometimes difficult relationship with his father, as well as his common sense and ambition. He also disputes the idea that Bush was handed what he wanted on a silver platter, and describes how he worked hard jobs as a young man, had to make risky financial decisions, genuinely enjoyed his community service in Houston, and generally liked to get his hands dirty in poor communities. Smith knocks the notion that Bush "stole" the presidency, and argues that Gore lost mostly due to his own arrogance and mistakes, rather than the Supreme Court. He also writes admiringly of Bush's bluntness, his contribution to fighting AIDS in Africa, No Child Left Behind, Medicare expansion, and "compassionate conservatism" in general, as well as his leadership during the 2008 financial crisis at a time when his approval ratings were in the gutter and the Republican Party was trying to distance itself from him; Smith concludes that the 2008 crash was mostly not Bush's fault, and he does a great job making complex issues accessible to the reader.

Still, there is relatively little background on the Bush family, or on Bush's psychology or private life. Smith seems fond of predictable zingers, and some of Smith's characterizations seem a bit broad; Smith seems to equate Bush's Christian faith with a lack of sophistication, and his "decider" attitude as reckless. The book seems to rely too heavily on secondary research, and Smith reports Bush's "Gog and Magog" call to Chirac as an established fact, although I don't believe it has ever been confirmed. Smith asserts that Bush was not much of a reader; inaccurate, as far as I know. Also, Smith tends to cover only those developments that were making headlines at the time, so there is little on, say, Iran's nuclear ambitions or the housing crisis. Smith also criticizes Bush's assertion of executive power, but never really compares it to similar actions (the Louisiana Purchase, Japanese internment, court-packing, or other such examples) Smith asserts that Bush "personalized" foreign policy in an unprecedented fashion by elevating Rice as a sort of point woman to deal with the Russians, although many presidents have utilized their national security advisors in like manner. Smith often criticizes the counterterrorism policies of the administration but never explains why Bush's successor often adopted the same ones.

The author saves the most criticism for the decision to invade Iraq, which Smith considers the worst foreign-policy blunder in presidential history. However, there are a few problems with Smith's narrative here. At one point he discusses the intelligence community's October 1, 2002 NIE on Iraqi WMD, and accuses them of turning "its back on an intelligence community tradition of objective analysis" and that it "tailored its analysis to conform to Bush's determination to lead the country to war." This seems misleading. Among America's fifteen intelligence agencies, there was wide agreement that Iraq was continuing its WMD programs; the UN, global think tanks, and even Saddam's own generals believed the same. Groupthink was part of the problem, and the agencies had reached their position on the issue long before Bush came to office. Besides, an NIE from the intelligence community lists both the agencies' conclusions as well as specific

dissents. But the idea that Saddam had no WMDs seemed pretty implausible at the time. Smith also writes that Bush blamed the military for the Iraq debacle after 2003, but this is unconvincing since Bush apparently never viewed it as a debacle in the first place. Smith also writes that purported ties between Saddam and al-Qaeda were “non-existent”; in fact, there were such ties, but the CIA assessed that they did not amount to much, and never translated into an active, symbiotic relationship, or into one where Iraq was exercising authority over al-Qaeda or any direction or control over its plotting.

Smith also describes both Iraq and Afghanistan as “disastrous wars of aggression” (Afghanistan?), and even calls Afghanistan a “war of choice” without raising any alternatives; he hints that Bush should have at least made a diplomatic overture to the Taliban, even though the US did precisely that and had it rejected; Smith also forgets to mention that al-Qaeda had already essentially declared war on the US before Bush was elected. Smith also writes that Bush “was warned of a possible terrorist attack prior to 9/11 and ignored the warnings.” I assume this is a reference to the August 6, 2001 PDB on a possible al-Qaeda attack on the homeland, but that PDB did not actually contain any specific, actionable intelligence that could have prevented such an attack. Also, one can, of course, point to specific lapses by the FBI, CIA, or the White House that might have prevented the attacks; the US could have provided more funding for national security measures or aviation safety improvements, or pursued al-Qaeda more aggressively, but would Congress and the American public really have supported such steps at a time when budget cuts were common and the world seemed relatively safe? America tends to be reactive, not proactive. You can make a case that 9/11 was Bush’s failure, but it was also a national failure as well. Smith also asserts that the phrase “war on terror” elevated “the terrorists to the status of belligerents” and attributes it to Bush’s “arrogance,” but he does not really critique the approach itself, nor does he explain why subsequent administrations have also treated America’s conflict with al-Qaeda as a war. Smith also writes that Bush considered himself “an agent of God placed on earth to combat evil...he was structuring another Crusade against the evildoers of the Muslim world.” Smith also brings up Cofer Black’s famous “flies walking across their eyeballs” presentation about CTC’s war plan, writing that “Black’s lumping of the Taliban and al Qaeda together was not questioned.” He seems to imply that the idea originated with Black, even though Bush had already announced such a policy change. Smith also discusses the “enhanced interrogation techniques” that were proposed and approved and writes that they included mock executions and false burials, even though these techniques actually ended up being rejected (the Senate report on the RDI program was also released in December 2014, not January 2015, as Smith writes) Smith also calls the Patriot Act “the most ill-conceived piece of domestic legislation since the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798”; while the Patriot Act certainly has its detractors, is it really worse than, say Indian removal, the fugitive slave law, or previous pieces on sedition and immigration? Smith also fails to explain why the act’s provisions have been renewed so many times; he never even goes into the details of such things as Section 215, STELLAR WIND, the FISA court, and the many controversies in them. When he does bring up STELLAR WIND, he describes it as being targeted “against those suspected of being domestic terrorists”; he does not mention the fact that the program (collecting on both US and non-US persons) targeted international communications, not purely domestic ones. He also blames the Iraq war for the resurgence of Islamic extremism but does not elaborate on it, and he also glosses over Bush’s attempts at an outreach to the Muslim and Muslim-American world. Smith also brings up Bush’s reference to the War on Terror as “the first war of the 21st century” and on this basis accuses him of “the trivialization of war...the equivalent of an athletic contest,” but this doesn’t make any sense. These sorts of things make you wonder if Smith really believes this or that or whether he’s just trying too hard to set a tone for Bush’s legacy or to put his own stamp on it.

Other annoyances include Smith’s constant footnotes and in-text references to other presidents and historical figures; a lot of these seem intended to promote Smith’s other biographies more than anything else. There are also some minor errors; Elliot Abrams apparently worked for George H.W. Bush, Bush apparently had a ranch in the hill country, Bush was apparently the only 2000 candidate to identify as an evangelical, Andrew

Card apparently served as Bush Senior's commerce secretary, Richard Armitage is called an "undersecretary" of state, Bill Burck is called a "speechwriter," and other such things. They add up, but they are a bit trivial. The book never comes off as a hatchet job or anything, despite the occasional condescending tone.

An informative, somewhat nuanced and well-researched work overall.

Matt says

Smith offers up another refreshing presidential biography, turning his attention to a recent resident of the Oval Office and one who brought much controversy to his two-terms. To paraphrase one of this president's most ominous comments, readers are either in his corner or against all for which he stood. Either way, Smith presents a thorough view of the man and his time from birth to the wonders of life after the spotlight shifted elsewhere. Smith's well-rooted biography puts George W. Bush in three camps throughout his life to date: the good, the bad, and the downright ugly. All of these meld together to create a man who sought to use his time as POTUS to leave America (and the world) a lasting impression of his decisions. As can be seen in the biography, some are surely indelible and will have adverse effects for a generation at least. These themes can be found within this wonderfully structured biographical piece, full of powerful quotes and supported arguments, the sign of a superior tome. Smith is a stellar biographer and this biography is not only timely, but is surely worth the reader's time and attention.

No matter how you feel about the man they called Dubya, he was able to show that he had a good side and one that meant well for the larger populace. While he was born into a family with a silver spoon wedged in his mouth, Bush was not free of the foibles that beset men of the generation. Boozing, drugs, and random sexual partners all played a role in his twenties, something that has never been refuted. However, by finding himself and a path on which he wanted to lead his life, Bush changed his lifestyle for the better, putting his wife and family before himself. Smith explores this selfless act and allows Bush to attribute it to finding Jesus, a personal choice that he used for the rest of his public life. While the reader can accept the born-again philosophy or not, it is apparent that there was a "one-eighty turn" after this personal choice, which is chalked up to one of Bush's great feats in life. Additionally, Bush sought to shape America in his early days as president, pushing forward with the 'No Child Left Behind' program, an educational initiative that would ensure children from all walks of life receive adequate and equivalent educational opportunities. Scoffed at by some, Bush's Compassionate Conservatism tried to accentuate that there were issues with the current system and that children, the building blocks of the future, needed to find themselves on equal footing, no matter their socio-economic background or familial situation. Smith applauds Bush for this and shows how the impetus for this program came not only from his wife, Laura, but also a sense that there needed to be more for America's children. One could also look at some of Bush's domestic policies as good or at least decent in that he tried to peel back the tax burden on the everyday American, but also stuck to lowering amounts that the upper classes paid. The hands-off approach falls in line with fiscal conservatism allowed Americans who were out of work to be able to keep that little bit extra in their pockets while trying to get back on their feet. Smith adds some more fodder to this aspect of Bush's life in the latter portion of the biography, discussing a focus to fight AIDS in Africa, through PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), which did allocate large sums through Congress to help control the distribution of medicines and preventative measures in those countries hit with AIDS and other diseases that offer a high rate of morbidity. One could argue that it offsets some of the more problematic areas of Bush's presidency, though this 'Band-Aid' solution does not distract from some issues on which I will expound below. While he did have his shortcomings, Bush's heart was, at least on some occasions, in the right place.

With the good must also come the bad, and Smith does not hold back when discussing these, peppering examples throughout the biography. Perhaps one of the largest issues that weaves itself throughout is that Bush surrounded himself with advisors who bowed to his will, or tried to muzzle the few who publicly aired their discontent. Smith offers up numerous examples where politically savvy individuals, much more in tune with the pulse of Washington, simply stood mute as Bush led America down the path towards highly problematic outcomes, when there was a clear view of the pitfalls ahead. As shall be discussed below, there were a plethora of bad decisions that mushroomed into something horrendous, more because those who could speak out against him did nothing. Bush's choice to rule with an iron fist or not to seek the advise of his advisors led to horrible decisions and left the country grasping at straws. One key example would be Bush's handling of Hurricane Katrina, arriving in the summer of 2005, where POTUS waited until after the devastation came and then tried to wrestle control out of the hands of the governors, making himself look like the saviour (pun intended, see below). Bush's ignorance to things only to have them blow-up later is surely one of the fundamental issues with his presidency and a serious personality flaw that plagued him until he returned to private life. Another issue that Smith presented repeatedly would be Bush's reliance on his religion to explain how he handles life. Far be it from me to criticise what someone believes or how they practice their faith, but Smith offers up some key examples of Bush's self indoctrination that his 'finding Christ' left him to be a vessel for God to use in the battle with evil. I kid you not, the man publicly saw himself as God's agent to fight evil in its many forms, usually from his Oval Office perch. This mentality, while a personal sentiment on how being born-again shaped his outlook, offers nothing if not a jaded view and perhaps one that substantiates that he wanted power and would justify it in any way he possibly could. One final area, related to the previous example would be that while Bush gave up alcohol and drugs in his late thirties, he spent most of his presidency intoxicated on power and his decisions reflected this complete lack of sober-thinking. While the last of the three sections below will exemplify some more concrete examples, Bush would not hand over the reins of power or let anyone talk him out of his views. "You are either with us or against us" seems to have been part of his slobbering drunk mantra, as he turned from being Leader of the Free World to its only Saviour. Again, Smith shows prime examples of Bush paraphrasing passages in the Book of Revelations to explain how he was battling Gog and Magog, wrestling with Evil as God's Chosen Soldier ahead of Judgement Day. And this was the elected leader of the United States of America, who used events to his favour to guilt, cajole, and bully others within the democratic machine to drink the Kool-Aid (dare I say, Bush though it was the Blood of Christ?) and follow him down this path of half-truths in an alternate reality. If this were the worst that Smith had to offer, I would laugh it off, but we have yet to tackle some of the worst, which is yet to come. Bush made many bad decisions, which cannot be erased by some good aspects elucidated above.

It takes a special type of man to have an ugly side so deeply entrenched that he is oblivious to its existence. I would venture to say that Bush was so out of touch with the world that he allowed his jaded views and completely eccentric spin on evangelical Christianity to turn him into a world tyrant, though he would hide behind the democratic process to justify his decisions. Events of September 11, 2001 shaped America in a way that could not have been foreseen, at least to the layperson. Smith shows how Bush knew of these threats and chose to do nothing before they boiled over (as he did with Hurricane Katrina and the 2008 Economic Meltdown). Bush's reaction to the events of early September 2001, both immediate and long-term, cemented his complete buffoonery as a man, a politician, and a leader. One could argue, as Smith does, that this was the beginning of Bush's binging, which led to a state of complete intoxication until January 20, 2009, when he handed over the reins of power to President Obama. Smith argues brilliantly that Bush not only sought retribution while the Twin Towers were still smouldering, but wanted it to be an act that the world would notice. As he did so, he sought the world's compassion and sympathy for the atrocious act of terror enacted on its citizens. Those who know me well will know how I feel about September 11th, so I will not reiterate it here, but this knee-jerk reaction was only the tip of the stupidity that Bush began thereafter. While waging a war in a country said to be harbouring bin Laden, Bush demanded that his officials find a

tie-in that would bring Iraq into the mix. Somehow Saddam Hussein must have been involved or counselled the terrorists. When that did not work, it was the apparent weapons of mass destruction, all to bring down a second regime. Now then, it was not enough to go in and remove those responsible or seek to remove Hussein through diplomatic channels, but Bush tried to create conflicts to make himself look better. Two wars, countless lives lost, and they are still being fought today, all because the man could not grasp the concept of state sovereignty. Besides that, Bush's ugliness extended into his disregard of international treaties and laws passed through the democratic process laid out in the US Constitution. Bush skirted these rules and promises at will, enacting torture and ill-treatment of individuals because they did not fit within the narrow interpretation that he saw of things like the Geneva Conventions. Deplorable ideas like this drip from page after page of Smith's work, while Bush sought to push onwards, refusing to allow anyone to contradict him. And for what? To leave the country in two wars and with black marks on its reputation for decades all because he wanted to look like the hero; the Chosen One that God sent to battle with Evil. Thank God for the judicial branch, who hammered home the unconstitutionality of these plans, but being a reactive body, the damage was done and a tyrant was left to develop into something worse.

I would go so far as to equate some of Bush's tendencies with those of infamous dictators and not see it as a stretch. Hitler, Stalin, Ceausescu, Amin.... all of these men ruled with an iron fist as much as Bush. However, while they sought to attack their own people, Bush looked outward and sought to use his power to oppress many in foreign lands (and I would venture to say he was worse than many imperialists). He used his own political system to fall into line with his ideas, refusing to accept alternatives and pushing scare-tactics into the minds of his legislators to force them to see a jaded perspective. Why did no one stop him? That is the lingering question. Was the attack on America that Tuesday morning in September 2001 so bad that no one dare speak out against it or him? It would appear so, which only sickens me even more. Smith offers up much more than his political dictatorship as he fleshes out this biography, but its stink pervades every vignette that is offered up, each decision that Bush made. One could go so far as to say that he did place Americans in harm's way, sending tens of thousands of them off to fight in the wars, spending billions of dollars and these two wars rather than earmarking these funds on domestic programs, and pushing a false sense of stability into the minds of the everyday American, which could have helped precipitate the 2008 Financial Meltdown. The man was out of control, hated by the world, and oblivious to how horrid he was. And yet, through his intoxication on power and bully tactics, he used those around him to push his ideas through Congress or vetoed those he did not like. Smith tries to soften the blow at times, but I was pleased to see that I was not the only one who saw how disgusting this man's actions were and what it did to my Neighbour to the South.

Some will say that they supported Bush because they could not fathom the Democratic Party while others argue they stood behind a man who tried to defend the honour of their country. Others still will say the man did the best he could with what he had. Smith helps support my belief that this was more than a political game, this was an inherent attempt to use the most powerful military and depths of the war chests to do whatever he saw fit. What does a Canadian, like myself, have spouting off an opinion on the leader of another country? What happens in the United States plays a significant role on how things play out in Canada and around the world (perhaps another reason we are watching the 2016 General Election so closely). Bush took America and the world into places that could not be reversed with the swearing-in of a new administration. ISIS has come to prominence in Iraq because of Bush, though the man is twiddling his thumbs down in Crawford, Texas and earning millions on a speaking tour. Deplorable and one can make a strong case that we have a war criminal in our midst. Smith would likely be able to support those claims, and did so in various points of this biography.

There were countless other sections of the biography that have not been explored in this review, but which offer a well-rounded look at Bush and his time in office. Any reader curious enough to take the time and

explore them, I would encourage it and ask that they see just how troublesome things were from 2001-09. Smith did his best, though sometimes, one can only dress up a horrible situation in so many ways.

With his powerful writing style that pulls the reader in and delivers vignettes full of detail, Smith presents the reader with an essential biographical piece. One can only hope the length is not a deterrent, or some of the denser topics, though Smith is able to explain things in a succinct and easy to digest manner. If only the man himself were as simple to understand, rather than being a simpleton through and through.

Kudos, Mr. Smith for this stellar piece. I needed a chance to stand on my soapbox and expound some of the vitriolic comments that have always come to mind about this man, though when dealing with a tyrant, sometimes you cannot stand idly by and wait. I look forward to exploring more of your biographies and hope that you have at least one more in you.

Like/hate the review? An ever-growing collection of others appears at:
<http://pecheyponderings.wordpress.com/>

Justin says

I think this review sums up a lot of my fears as I read this book: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/15/i...>

Kevin Henning says

George W. Bush, the self proclaimed “decider” was elected President after an extremely close election and controversial Supreme Court decision. He came to the Oval Office as Governor of Texas, a state widely known as having the weakest executive office in the country. He presided during the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and soon after started a preemptive war in Iraq based on faulty intelligence and a preconceived desire for war. Bush, Vice President Cheney and others authorized multiple forms of torture of enemy combatants.

A born again Christian, Bush relied on his religious faith and advice from his closest advisors and actively avoided serious debate amongst experts when making important decisions. Given these proclivities, it’s no surprise he committed the most serious foreign policy blunder in US history and is widely viewed as one of the United States’ worst presidents.

President Bush spent much of his two terms fighting HIV/AIDS in Africa. His ability to get congress to commit over \$30 billion to the effort undoubtedly saved hundreds of thousands of African lives. He persuaded a reluctant Republican congress to bail out the financial and auto industry saving thousands of American jobs and likely averting a depression.

Despite the disastrous unnecessary war in Iraq and all it brought, his commitment to Africa and his respect for President-elect Obama during the transition helped me to grow fond of President Bush while reading Smith’s biography. Professor Smith’s work is thorough, balanced and readable.

Paul Wilson says

Have to admit, Bush was not exactly my favorite president in history, and one only has to read Smith's opening line in the book to understand his feelings as well. Still, I think it takes a generation (20 years or so) to fully assess a president's legacy. But while this biography may be a bit premature, it provides a critical and fascinating insight into Bush's eight years in the White House. The most elucidating fact from the book is that Rumsfeld was far more practical than I initially imagined; he was quite wary of the Iraq invasion, and was not part of the Cheney/ Wolfowitz team that so heavily pushed for that most glaring of foreign policy blunders. Bush rightfully "Bye Felicia'd" Cheney towards the end of his presidency, but only when it was too late.

The tragic irony of the Bush presidency is that he only showed real strength in his last year in office (pushing the politically toxic yet essential TARP and auto bailouts that prevented complete economic collapse) when his popularity was its nadir. Still, as the book shows, his legacy will forever be defined by the Iraq War, which Smith concludes, not without reason, is "the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American president."

Stan Prager says

I lived through the entire eight years of the George W. Bush presidency, paying careful attentions to the events and their echoes. His boosters, with a kind of unintended oxymoronic flourish, vigorously maintained that "he kept us safe." The reality was instead an ongoing rebuke to that assertion, a tragically comic counter-intuitive timeline of disaster. Those two terms of Bush were instead marked by: the most significant attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor, with a greater loss of life, months after the termination of the previous administration's program to target those adversaries; the invasion of Afghanistan to bring those attackers to justice, who instead slipped away, leaving American troops endlessly bogged down in a conflict that defies resolution; the expense of much more blood and treasure in the gratuitous invasion of Iraq on the false pretense of weapons of mass destruction that never existed, permanently fracturing that nation, and effecting a dramatic destabilization of the Middle East; the death of nearly two thousand Americans in New Orleans in Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath as the nation stood by paralyzed by inaction; the first detonation of a nuclear bomb by North Korea; the reignition of the Cold War with Russia marked by hostilities in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, sparked by NATO expansion and American unilateralism; and finally, a near cataclysmic economic collapse in the most significant financial downturn since the Great Depression, in the wake of rash deregulation that included the crippling of the net capital rule. If "W" kept us safe, danger seemed like a welcome respite. Even the space shuttle exploded! While it is hardly fair to blame him for the latter, I recall wondering at the time whether even that tragedy might have been averted had Bush not selected as NASA Administrator a skeptic of Big Bang cosmology. Regardless, catastrophe seemed to cling to President Bush—he seemed incapable of carrying a cup of coffee across the room without spilling it.

With his 2016 biography, Bush, "Francis Parkman Prize" winner Jean Edward Smith became the first bona fide historian to profile the life of George W. Bush and chronicle his calamitous tenure as Commander in Chief. Smith, a noted author and academic, has among his prolific credits biographies of Grant, FDR and Eisenhower, so he comes to the task with both an established resume and frame of reference. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that the author seems to barely contain his bewilderment as events unfolded around Bush-43 that spawned one wrong turn after another. At the same time, the book underscores that my own memory of that era was hardly hyperbolic—it really was that bad—while it challenges some of the analyses

made by those of us on the outside.

Most significantly, Smith rebuts once and for all the dark suspicion shared by many Americans that the real power behind the façade of the Bush Administration was the sinister Dick Cheney, villainously yanking on the puppet strings from within the confines of his secret bunker. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. While Cheney did serve as proud parade marshal for the darkest of the dark avenues in the administration's roadmap to torture, secret detention, extraordinary rendition, regime change, domestic surveillance, and much more, he was hardly the mastermind many imagined him to be. Instead—and this is the book's well-argued thesis—George W. Bush really was “The Decider” that he confidently alleged, a much-ridiculed claim that turns out to be surprisingly accurate. And that, according to Smith, was exactly the problem: Bush's intellect and expertise were vastly outgunned by the crises he either encountered or manufactured, but he never ventured far perspective beyond a small circle of advisors, and yet remained vitally loyal to the conviction—ever bolstered by his religious faith—that it was his responsibility to make every decision in every arena.

Presidents from Buchanan to Hoover to Carter have been pilloried for dithering—for a failure to act decisively in a time of national crisis. Decisiveness is generally considered a strength for the Chief Executive; George W. Bush may well be the first occupant of the Oval Office to prove an exception to that rule. While Bush has often been grouped with Buchanan by historians who rate him among the worst of our chief executives, a perhaps more apt comparison might be to another often ranked near the bottom, Andrew Johnson. Like the latter, Bush seemed guided by an absolute unwavering certainty that he was always in the right, acting for very best interests of the country, even as evidence accumulated to the contrary. Because of Bush's determination to leave no issue undecided, he not only made repeated bad judgements but frequently cast verdicts in areas perhaps better left to the vague or implicit, spawning doctrines in American foreign and domestic policy that would endure far beyond his time in office.

Unlike a Lincoln or a JFK, Bush rarely solicited the opinions outside of his immediate orbit, especially from those who might challenge him. This was underscored, for instance, when he arbitrarily ruled that al-Qaeda and Taliban combatants were not entitled to prisoner of war status under the Geneva Convention. This highly consequential verdict was pronounced by the President without consulting the National Security council, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of State, or the State Department! Both the military and the State Department objected, to no avail. Smith rightly dubs this as “another unfortunate example of the personalization of presidential power under George W. Bush.” [p284] Sadly, it was but one of many. Smith's biography does not dwell much on Bush's early years, which were hardly marked by accomplishment, but instead centers on his time in the White House. That is a sound decision, under the circumstances, and a reminder that while some men came to the Oval Office with an impressive resume—Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt, for example—others, such as Abraham Lincoln or Harry Truman, had little to show for themselves before destiny called. George W. Bush was a scion of a notable family who played the role of prodigal son, dabbling in whiskey and cocaine, barely showing up to play his Texas Air National Guard get-out-of-Vietnam-card, until Jesus Christ, mountain biking and Laura Welch Bush came along to save him. There isn't much of a tale to tell, and unlike other biographers—God save us from Lincoln's “The Prairie Years”—Smith doesn't drag the reader through years of irrelevancy until he takes the national stage. Yes, Bush was Governor of Texas, but for those who don't know, that is a largely powerless position that entails little more than serving as a master of ceremonies at a beauty pageant. Smith zeroes in on the most significant aspect of Bush's pre-presidential years, which was his “born-again” experience that rescued him from his wayward tendencies and engraved upon him a conviction that he was doing God's work, something that was to resound unfortunately upon the nation when he became Chief Executive.

Bush, who relied on his faith in Christ, did not permit his so-called Christian values to interfere with his pursuit of his version of justice, championing torture—euphemistically re-branded as “enhanced interrogation techniques”—as a critical tool of the war on terror. The Philippine Insurrection of the early 1900s was an especially brutal if long-forgotten foreign adventure that saw American forces commit often

horrific war crimes, yet even in this morally- ambiguous environment an army officer was court-martialed for waterboarding (then tagged “the water cure”) Philippine insurgents. Bush specifically advocated waterboarding enemy combatants; Abu Zubaydah—still held in Guantanamo in 2017, by the way—was waterboarded eighty-three times, and Bush vigorously defended the practice. [p297] In this case, “The Decider” decided to go medieval. We have to assume Christ was along for the ride.

Bush’s faith was indeed genuine, if somewhat fanatical and ... yes, even somewhat mad: Smith cites a communication with France’s President Chirac, in which Bush asserts: “Gog and Magog are at work in the Middle East. Biblical prophesies are being fulfilled. This confrontation was willed by God, who wants to use this conflict to erase His people’s enemies before a new age begins.” Chirac had no clue what Bush was raving about, but once he figured it out, it became even more clear that there was no place for France in this kind of unhinged religious crusade. [p339]

If Smith’s Bush sounds like a hatchet job, it clearly is not. The author goes out of his way to try to find the positive in the man and his leadership, although for those who are not his loyalists this is truly a challenge. Smith does not overlook Bush’s dedication to education in the “No Child Left Behind” initiative or in the senior prescription drug plan he advanced, even if these efforts suffered in various degrees from poor execution and a lack of funding. Nor does he fail to credit Bush for his commitment to immigration reform, even as the President found himself badly out of step with his own party on this issue, its voters already rehearsing for the message of a demagogue waiting in the wings.

Smith’s biography does rescue from a kind of ignominy Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who—while fully on the team for the initial decision to go forward with the Iraq War debacle—not only objected to the direction of post-war nation-building that attempted to impose a Western-style democracy on Iraq, but prior to the war itself prepared a remarkably prescient memo that contained twenty-nine things that could go sideways in American intervention, which Smith recognizes as “a precise compendium” of what actually did go wrong in Iraq. [p328] Dick Cheney, as noted, is revealed as no less malevolent than expected but also far less commanding. Colin Powell clearly stands out exactly as America perceived him at the time: a man with a firm moral center who was used and abused by the Bush Administration as the face of an indefensible policy of aggression that tarnished our nation before the world and forever humbled Powell’s political ambitions. Condoleezza Rice, who strived so hard to be Bush’s Kissinger, comes across as many of us always suspected, an intellectual wedded to ideology who prominently talked the talk but was way above her pay grade in the complex realm of realpolitik. At the end of the day, a flawed and largely incompetent President was served by a gang of colorful but weak—if flamboyant—underlings.

Presidential biography is one of my favorite genres. I have read bios of more than a third of our Chief Executives, and surveys of a dozen more, so I have taken on a profound sense of what these individuals have had to contend with while sitting, ever precariously, at the seat of such immense power. By every test, George W. Bush fared very badly in that role, and whatever his intentions left our nation far worse off by the close of his tumultuous tenure than it was when he came to it.

When he left office in January 2009, Bush’s approval rating was at a historic low of twenty-two percent. As it was, the best turn for his legacy was the election of Donald Trump, which has fostered—at least among Republicans—a kind of nostalgia for the Bush era, warts and all. This is—one might snarkily suggest—like a lung cancer victim looking back fondly on an episode with pneumonia. Bush advocates might chastise Smith’s work, arguing that Bush had strengths not adequately showcased, but even supporters have to admit that “W” presided over an era of unmitigated disaster, leaving the nation battered and polarized so severely that we are still reeling from it nearly a decade later. Smith will hardly be the last historian to profile Bush, and as time passes it is likely that perspectives will be modified, and judgments will be tweaked. In the meantime, I highly recommend Smith’s biography for an unsparing chronicle of eight years that forever altered America.

Nick Lloyd says

“Why do people join the military if they don’t want to fight and defend the country?”

-President George W. Bush, who, despite using creative means to avoid service in Vietnam, was confused to learn from the Joint Chiefs that morale would drop if Iraq deployments were extended from 12 to 15 months

Once again, a brilliant biography by one of the best, Jean Edward Smith. It's incredibly difficult to find new information on a modern figure who governed in the age of the internet, but Smith proves his worth yet again. This would be a great book to recommend to your Christian conservative friends, who would surely love to learn about the abortion "Duby" had to pay for in the 70's for the girlfriend who he knocked up, or the Dennis Duffy-esque lifestyle of the fresh Harvard graduate, who would show up to work drunk for the job his father arranged for him, only to brag about how drunk he was to his coworkers. The best thing this book does, however, is remind us of why we rejected Bush so handily in the first place. The overt lack of competence, whether in dealing with the Iraq War or the fallout of Hurricane Katrina, led us to seek out those who know how to govern in 2008. Sadly, we had forgotten those lessons by 2016, and will likely be doomed to a repeat performance over the next four to eight years.

Emmett Hoops says

Ultimately, the person who is George W. Bush is a tragic figure. He never knew why he wanted to be Governor of Texas; he didn't really understand why he wanted to be President, so when he was elected to do the job, he went at it like Mr. President (hee, haw) Whom Everyone Must Obey Because I Make The Decisions. The disastrous decisions of his first term are laid out almost as an indictment; along the way, though, you have to have compassion for this simpleton Bush. I was in tears for the last 20 pages: finally, finally, W understood what it meant to be President of all the people. But that was in 2008, when his term was coming to an end. Would that he had had that wisdom earlier in his Presidency.

This book is extremely well written. It adds much to our understanding of this controversial man, George W. Bush.

Jimmy Reagan says

Here's the first stab at a definitive biography of George W. Bush by a major biographer. I don't think it will hold that title long if another famous biographer tries his hand, but it is first in that sense. It's hard for me to classify this biography. On the one hand, the skilled hand of Mr. Smith is ever present, yet he makes blunders as well. I could hardly put the book down, yet I disagreed often and picked up on clear bias.

There is plenty of research, no character discussed is ever wooden, and you learn much about Mr. Bush's personality. Still, Smith paints in broad strokes. He equates Bush's distinct Christianity with a lack of sophistication, his penchant for “deciding” as reckless and brash, and his outlook, particularly on Iraq, a

general naivety that continually led him astray.

Smith failed to see that perhaps that Christianity gave him a moral grounding that is often tragically missing in Washington. Right or wrong, he really meant well. His “deciding” was surely better than indecisiveness in horrific events. (911, Katrina, the Great Recession–Bush wasn’t a lucky man). When Smith outlined what Bush should have done, he at times looked like the naive one when he seemed to feel that his ideas would have flawlessly followed the script. No matter the plan, the players in Iraq and surrounding areas were the equivalent to having a tiger by the tail. We all learned that together.

When he suggests that Bush overreacted to 911, he doesn’t connect the dots to what he told us in this book—we all wanted to go fight somebody! The Democrats were ready too. A few started disagreeing when Iraq was brought up, but very few at the beginning. Even in this harsh assessment too, there is no doubt that Bush believed there were weapons of mass destruction. If you sincerely believed that to be true, what else could you have done? He writes as if 20/20 hindsight was at Bush’s disposal beforehand.

There’s criticism of his managing of his staff. What president didn’t have staff issues, or been guilty of listening too much to the most agreeable staff members. That’s the human element that always complicates management.

Bush had some failures for sure. Like most of us, often our greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses come from the same component of our personality. It was likely true for Bush too. Amazingly, he quotes Bush admitting, to some degree, many of the very things Smith perhaps overemphasizes. I actually grew to appreciate Bush in places I had not before, especially in things like his handling of the mortgage crisis. We teetered on the edge of a crisis to rival the Great Depression and it called for measures that we might most of the time strongly disagree with. It’s almost 8 years later and Bush clearly got that one right.

As for the book, Smith tells us he thinks Bush is a horrible disaster in the first paragraph. (Was the editor asleep?) Forget building a case and convincing the audience over the course of the book. That crazy method put him on trial as much as Bush page by page.

So is this a great book? I closed it at the end more confident that Bush was a genuinely good man who gave it his all. I was further convinced that Bush would be a guy quite enjoyable to spend a day with. He’d defend his overall approach as it was a matter of principle to him, yet he would readily admit his mistakes, and he’d be a gracious host whether you agreed with him or not. I found that refreshing here in July 2016 as this book hits the shelves and we are in more danger than in Bush’s days and miss his magnanimous ways.

So I reached those conclusions and grew in appreciation of Bush while this book I couldn’t put down tried to convince me that he was a failure. Does that make it a five-star wonder or a one-star dud? I have no idea. I’ll be gracious like George W. Bush and give it 4 stars.

I received this book free from the publisher. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission’s 16 CFR, Part 255.

Josh says

In short, this biography of George W. Bush was a very enlightening one for a mostly disliked president.

Smith mostly focuses on his two terms as President of the US. He discusses Bush's need to treat his post in a rather pious nature, his leadership flaws and mistakes, and a few positive aspects that his presidency set forth.

As a president, we mostly remember his policies after 9/11, because that was his main focus. His blunders at consulting the intelligence agencies around him and then not listening to them is astonishing. Bush pushed forth his own idea of what needed to be done to make our nation *safer*, to liberate the Iraqi people (and then push forth for a democratic society), and to find Osama Bin Laden in a way that would make you think you were watching a stooge in the White House.

Smith breaks down almost every decision that Bush had to make in a rich, concise and readable fashion that made it a remarkable read. There is so much to this book that I will not go into, but even though you may not like him as a president, Bush was and is an interesting person. Below are some quotes that sum up the book and its agenda:

"George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq will likely go down in history as the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American president. That error was compounded when he unilaterally decided to bring democracy to Iraq. Bush had little familiarity with the politics of the Middle East, was unaware of the burden this would place on the American military, and was oblivious to how the Iraqis and the rest of the world would view his decision."

(another one re-iterating this point)

"George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in March 2003 was a tragic error. It was compounded by his follow-on decision to install Western-style democracy and the ensuing military occupation that entailed. The tragic loss of life, the instability, the sectarian strife, and the rise of ISIS are all in many respects attributable to those decisions. Over four thousand American soldiers had been killed in Iraq by the time Bush left office, and over thirty thousand wounded. Iraqi deaths exceeded 100,000. Another two million Iraqis fled to other countries. And the direct military cost to the United States approached \$600 billion. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, America's international prestige had rarely been higher. When Bush left office in 2009, respect for the United States had rarely been lower."

We will always remember the perceived bumbling idiot who would get on stage and laugh and smile with his Bush-isms, but Smith shows us that behind those appearances was a man who knew what HE wanted to do with this country and unfortunately, "*the decider*" (as he once called himself) made a few decisions that not only were disastrous for us, but for the world.

Amr says

Good detailed summary of the Bush administration with focus on Iraq (of course). The book doesn't hide its criticism of Bush and his decisions. One good thing that the book illustrates is Bush's world view, how he sees the world, his role in it, and how he approaches making decisions.

Going through all the Bush years in one book like this can be very depressing given the number of huge mistakes he did. I've read many books before about each one, but to have them all in one story is a little shocking even though I've lived through these years.

You also get to understand Bush's point of view. Once you understand how he sees the world, it's easy to understand how he approaches his decisions. The book focuses on the small number of Bush's

accomplishments especially the AIDS initiative. It's certainly an important accomplishment, but it's essentially charity work. It shows that Bush has a good side, but as an ill-informed rich person, his idea of helping amounts to giving money. That's not a bad thing, but it's a normal thing.

The book is almost entirely secondarily-sourced with very little original reporting. It's understandable that very small number of people from the Bush administration would be willing to talk about the Bush years. But it's important to understand the book for what it is. It's not breaking any news and discovering long hidden secrets. It goes into details about certain parts of the Bush years, but given the amount of details about each of those years, the book doesn't go into so much details.

If you're not familiar with the Bush years, or have any illusions about how bad they were, or forgot how bad they were, read this book.

Hadrian says

It has now been nearly eight years since the end of the last presidential term of George W. Bush. With the benefit of modest hindsight, it is now possible to look back upon his administration with not only a sense of shame and disgust over what went wrong, but also a forlorn sense of recognizing opportunities lost. The United States once held a budget surplus before spiraling into deficit; tax cuts had cut government intake from corporations by a third; unemployment had spiked to nearly 10%; the price of gas had tripled; and the military had sunk into the morass of two wars abroad, shunned by its allies, distrusted and alone as the world's only superpower, its prestige and moral standing rocked by scandal.

There have been other biographies written of Mr. Bush before, some analyses of his administration, one memoir, and some crude grasps at psychology. This, as far as I know, is the first serious attempt to synthesize these into a cohesive single volume. I do not see much, if any, original research here from author interviews, mostly citations of secondary sources.

But what went wrong here? What were the lapses in authority or judgment which led the United States to carom from scandal to scandal, a litany of horrors stretching from Anthrax to Katrina? Smith suggests a few traits:

- A lack of substantive foreign policy experience, leading to misinterpretation of events and strained and often confused relationships with foreign leaders
- A tendency to promote and solely listen to a small coterie of advisors who tended to agree anyway, often disregarding alternative perspectives and regarding loyalty above all else, that "told Bush what he wanted to hear".
- A disregard for the previous norms and standards of the presidency, including the longstanding prohibition on torture
- Being "dynamically ignorant", where he was energetic and willing to take on new tasks, but unwilling to research them, which often manifested in "speaking without weighing the consequences".
- Ignoring complex issues, leading to a "simplistic" judgment which reduced the world to black and white terms
- Overreacting to events, and taking a 'macho' assertiveness to any threat, real or imagined

By the end, his popularity had collapsed - there was no one factor which contributed to it. The series of interminable wars, the economic collapse, the lack of response to natural disasters - only one of this would have cost him a chamber of Congress, but all of them combined led to historic unpopularity.

Smith at least attempts to be fair - he praises Bush for passing some meaningful domestic reforms, stepping up against AIDS, and he is quietly respectful of Bush's family life. For all his faults, at least Bush was kind and generous in person. Still, it will be difficult to dispute Smith's opening sentence, that "Rarely in the history of the United States has the nation been so ill-served as during the presidency of George W. Bush."

Steve says

<https://bestpresidentialbios.com/2019...>

Renowned historian and biographer Jean Edward Smith's "Bush" was published in 2016. Smith is professor emeritus at the University of Toronto. His biographies of Grant, FDR and Eisenhower were my favorites for those presidents. He also wrote "John Marshall: Definer of a Nation" which I'm planning to read as follow-up to my focus on presidential biographies.

Published eight years after his presidency ended, this 660-page biography covers Bush's life from his birth through the first years of his retirement. Unfortunately, Bush's pre-presidency receives comparatively limited attention and Smith's coverage of Bush's retirement is, by necessity, quite brief.

The core of this book is Bush's presidency with eighty percent of the biography devoted to his eight years in the White House. But readers expecting balanced coverage of these two terms are in for quite a surprise. From the book's first sentence to its last, Smith's disdain for the Bush presidency is exceedingly transparent.

The result is a presidential biography almost unlike any I've encountered – one without the pretense of balance or objectivity. Rather than drafting a reflective review of his subject's life, Smith has penned a scathing indictment of Bush for a variety of alleged miscues, misjudgments and misdeeds – primarily focused on his flawed response to the events of September 11, 2001.

To be sure, one cannot walk away from Smith's narrative – or have lived through Bush's presidency – and remain unconvinced the forty-third president made significant mistakes. But even readers who wholly agree with Smith's underlying premises are likely to find the lack of objectivity occasionally jarring. Adjudicating recent presidencies is just a far trickier business than grading ones long past.

This also feels less like a deeply-researched biography than an interesting and extremely readable synthesis of contemporary news reports, transcripts and tidbits harvested from the memoirs of White House insiders. Though it proves an artful reconstruction of Bush's presidency, this book is simply not revelatory in the same manner as Smith's previous presidential biographies.

Also missed here was the opportunity to better introduce several compelling supporting characters such as Karl Rove and Colin Powell. Smith's treatment of the 2008 economic crisis, which follows several hundred pages devoted to the war on terror, is relatively brief and somewhat simplistic. And in the end it fails to capture the full extent of the crisis or identify all of the causes which precipitated it. Finally, there are a number of (mostly minor) factual errors and typos which I would not expect in a book by this author.

Although “Bush” failed to live up to high expectations it is worth noting that its good aspects do outweigh the disappointments. Smith’s writing style is clear and engaging and consistently easy to follow. Specific high points include Bush’s campaign against Al Gore, the clear (but eventually tedious) review of the Florida re-count process and Bush’s decision-making process when choosing his Cabinet and senior aides and advisers.

Other highlights include an illuminating examination of Dick Cheney’s unprecedented influence over personnel and policy matters, an interesting review of Bush’s 2004 re-election campaign and, in general, penetrating behind-the-scenes access. And Smith does credit Bush for his John Roberts Supreme Court nomination, his response to the 2008 financial crisis and his global efforts against HIV.

But overall, Jean Edward Smith’s “Bush” fails to meet the high bar set by his earlier biographies of Grant, FDR and Eisenhower. As a scathing indictment of Bush’s policy failures it is extremely effective; as a balanced biography of Bush’s life it falls short of expectations. But on its merits alone, this biography will stand as a valuable placeholder until the definitive biography of George W. Bush’s life is written .

Overall rating: 3½ stars

Morgan says

This was so meticulously written, and chronicles the ascent of George W. Bush and the management of his White House so compellingly that I didn't want to put it down. Anyone who wants to understand what was happening behind those doors at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue during the Bush (II) years, should definitely read this.

Sean Curley says

Jean Edward Smith does not leave the reader waiting long for his verdict on his subject, with the first sentence of the preface opining: "Rarely in the history of the United States has the nation been so ill-served as during the presidency of George W. Bush." Not an uncommon verdict, to be sure. Smith, clearly, does not share the position of the legendary biographer David McCullough, who said he wrote only about men he admired -- though his past bibliography is largely a catalog of more estimable holders of public office, such as John Marshall, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Dwight D. Eisenhower (said bibliography also comes up a lot in terms of comparison between Bush and others; there have been many books written about George W. Bush, and many more sure to come, but I doubt any will include as many references to the work of General Lucius Clay). Anyone reading this book at time of publication will have lived through the Bush years, and so this is to a great extent a revisit of old experiences, albeit with new perspective on what was going on behind closed doors.

On a writing level, it is fairly clear that Smith's main impetus for writing this work was as a detailed critique of the Bush Administration's method of operating, and in particular its foreign policy (while leaving it up for debate whether Bush is America's worst president, he forthrightly states that the decision to invade Iraq is the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American president). By comparison, the personal life and to a great extent personality of Bush interests him far less. If one were to compare *Bush* to Smith's earlier *FDR*, a book of comparable length (662 pages of actual text for the former versus 636 for the latter), it took 304

pages for Smith to get FDR into the White House -- George W. has been sworn in by page 148, and the previous 50 pages were spent chronicling the 2000 election and the legal battle that culminated in *Bush v. Gore*. The first 54 years of Bush's life, up until his run for president, account for only 98 pages.

In some ways, perhaps, this reflects the author's opinion of the subject in other ways. Bush is shown to have lived a largely undistinguished life prior to the presidency. Academically undistinguished at both Andover and Yale (his admission to the latter a clear legacy admission), Smith consistently credits Bush with a solid work ethic, even if he arrived in many of his positions thanks to his father and grandfather's influence. His being assigned to flight training in the Texas Air Guard was blatant privilege, but he was an exceptional pilot by all accounts. His business career was neither a great failure nor success, but was buoyed by his father's rise to the vice presidency. As governor of Texas, he had virtually no executive power, but was successful at advancing his legislative agenda thanks to strong interpersonal skills. Alcoholism and drug use were problems in his youth, and his commitment to remaining sober in later life was the anchor of much of his personality, leading to his coming to evangelical Christianity.

The central thesis about the subject's failings as president would likely be reduced to the unfortunate combination of Bush's certainty in his own judgement, as well as his intellectual incuriosity. He knew little of the world beyond America's borders, but was all too quick to form his own opinions, aided by religious notions (one anecdote shows Bush making a forthright appeal to French president Jacques Chirac that "Gog and Magog" were at work in the Middle East, a reference that the French initially did not understand, and were subsequently horrified to learn indicated that the president was using the Book of Revelation as a guide to foreign policy) -- a problem exacerbated by the managerial style that Bush chose to apply to the presidency, which, in Smith's view, saw him try to apply his Harvard MBA style to public affairs, where his underlings hashed out the details and then presented him with a plan he could say yes or no to. Many of the worst decisions made during his presidency originated with Bush himself, rather than with any of the subordinates that the public often suggested were playing puppetmaster -- in particular, it was Bush who, on his own initiative, revised the plan for the swift liberation and withdrawal of Iraq into a long-term occupation headed by his handpicked viceroy, L. Paul Bremer.

The supporting cast of characters, also familiar to those who lived through the years -- Colin Powell, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, John Ashcroft, etc. -- also yield some interesting revelations. Rice, often cast in the public discourse at the time as one of the sensible members of the administration, comes across much less so here. Ashcroft and Rumsfeld, while flawed, come across considerably better than was often the case at the time (the attempt by the president to bully his own Attorney General into signing off on the extension of his surveillance programs from his sickbed is one of the more appalling episodes).

Despite its overall very negative view of Bush, Smith does credit him with some major initiatives, in particular his trailblazing role in the fight against AIDS in the developing world, which gets most of a chapter dedicated to it. As well, some of his initial domestic agenda, such as the good faith efforts at education reform, are treated favourably. Ironically, in the author's view it was in 2008, in the final months of his presidency, where Bush actually deigned to rely on expert advice during a crisis, that he seemed most suited to the job -- this being during the financial crisis, where he relied on his Treasury Secretary and the head of the Federal Reserve to formulate policy, and took aggressive action to try to prevent financial collapse. By that point, due to his earlier failures, almost nobody was listening to him or willing to extend him much credit.

On a writing level, Smith seems to be opposed very strongly to both the Iraq War and the earlier invasion of Afghanistan, but the case against the latter never really emerges, to my view. Clearly it was mishandled as a result of the rapid switch in focus to Iraq, but beyond that it is never spelled out why he considers it to have

been a misbegotten notion.
