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# The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush

*David Frum*

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My children, now eleven and nine, were the first members of our family to really become enthusiastic about George Bush. The thing that locked them in was a speech they saw early in 2000. We were visiting my in-laws in Florida and it was the sunset hour and we were having a drink on the little veranda. The children were inside, having a quiet moment, watching some television and, somehow freakishly, they turned it on to the news. They were watching CNN and they were showing a clip from a speech about education that candidate Bush had given. Each paragraph in the speech began with the ringing promise,

“No school across America ...” They didn’t need to hear a word more than that. They came running out to the veranda and said, “George Bush has promised to abolish school!” I said I didn’t think that was right. But they had seen it on television and who are you going to believe, the TV set or your own father? They were adamant.

After George Bush took office, I have to say that a certain disappointment began to creep into their lives. He promised no school across America, but school seemed to be continuing, kind of like a juggernaut. And then this winter, Washington was hit by snowstorms and the schools were

closed for an entire week. And, suddenly, they realized: you can trust people in politics after all. George Bush has belatedly honored his promise. There was no school—at least across northern Virginia.

It's a well-understood convention and custom that speeches must begin with jokes. But, I had a year and a half of writing jokes—for the president of the United States no less—and I can report that the president of the United States, the most powerful man in the world, hated my jokes. In fact, it got so bad that (chief of staff) Karl Rove actually began looking at early drafts of my speeches for my jokes in order to remove them. I'd written something that I thought was really quite good and Karl killed it. I saw him that day in the White House mess and I went over to him to complain. He's a very powerful person, so you do this with some caution, but I was so angry that I went up to him and said, "Karl, that joke was funny." And he acknowledged that it was. And then he said, "Presidents shouldn't be too funny." I thought, actually, that's quite smart. President Clinton would do those jokes once a year; they were really, really funny. And the reason they were funny was because he would make a joke and the audience would do a short, sharp intake of breath—*I can't believe he just said that!*—then, boom, out would come the reaction.

In my time at the White House I did once write a joke that the president did like and did use. That was a great honor. It succeeded because it was a joke that was not too funny. In the

interests of presidential sociology, I'll run through it here, because it's really not that funny. It was May of 2001 and President Bush was to make his first trip to California since his inauguration. This was a very politically troublesome trip because the president had not done well in California—Republicans had not done well in California for some time. California was having terrible economic difficulties and energy problems.

The president's schedule had been busy, so by the time they finally scheduled a trip in May, it was becoming something of an issue. *What was it that was keeping this president from traveling there?* He was a very physically energetic man and this was the largest state in the union. So, we had to somehow diffuse this problem with a joke. It fell to me to try to come up with something. So, I racked my brains and then it hit me that as governor of Texas, President Bush had acquired a cat. It was a cat that he had found up a tree in the governor's mansion and Governor Bush had scaled the tree and rescued the cat. He called it Ernie because it had six toes, like the cats that Ernest Hemingway collected in Florida. It was a savage, no-good, rotten cat. It clawed the furniture. When President Bush came to Washington, there was no way they could bring this feral animal to the White House. On the other hand, he couldn't just get rid of it, because cat lovers are an important political constituency in America. So they gave it to a friend of President Bush, a man named Brad Freidman who lived in Los Angeles. So, I thought, ah-ha, here's

my opportunity. So I suggested that President Bush would stand up and begin by saying, "Here I am in California and many people ask, what brings you here, why now?" And the line I suggested was: "That's easy, my cat lives here and I've come to visit him." And then I suggested that he say, "I'm happy to report that the cat loves Los Angeles. He's dating, he's got an agent, and for some reason no one can understand, he looks ten years younger than when we saw him last."

OK, so not too funny, but the president liked it. So the night before he was to deliver the speech, I got a call to come on up to the presidential suite, which is not something that usually happened to me. I hastily straightened my tie and went up there, and there was the president, sitting with a group of his friends, including the owner of the cat. He said, "I want to read you this." And then, with me standing there, he read them the joke. And they howled. They just howled with laughter. And then, of course, it hit me, what Karl meant: the president doesn't have to be funny, because they're going to laugh anyway.

Actually, President Bush is a very funny man. And he's at his funniest when he's off-the-cuff. At last year's White House Correspondents Dinner, which is at this huge banquet hall at the Washington Hilton with 2,000 people or more. The tables are bought by media organizations and they all compete to bring Hollywood types. That year, Greta Van Susteren got the star guest—Ozzy Osbourne. At a quiet moment during the dinner, Ozzy

Osbourne stood up and grasped two fistfuls of his lank, greasy hair, and shouted at President Bush, "Hey, Mr. President, you should wear your hair like mine!" And Bush did not miss a beat. He said, "Second term, Ozzy, second term."

We are meeting here today at a moment of grave crisis, both for this country and its traditional alliances in the world. We are on the brink of war—a war that, I think, no one doubts that America will win, but a war that has already done terrible, terrible damage to the structure of America's alliances. Many of America's friends have seized on this opportunity to distance themselves from the United States. This is a sad and grievous thing. For half a century, the United States, in order to defend Western Europe, picked up the nuclear revolver, pointed it at its own temple, and said, if anything happens to you, we are prepared to pull the trigger on ourselves. We will lay down our lives to save yours.

Now, by a freak of history, the first major blow to the territory of a NATO country fell not where people had expected, in Germany or Norway or Turkey, but on the United States. Americans, who were prepared to risk so much to defend these European allies, now bleeding and suffering and grieving, have turned to their friends and asked: what are you prepared to do for us? It has been something of a shock to the United States to discover that there are people in Europe who are prepared to accept the ultimate sacrifice from the United States ... who, when America called on them, not only are

nowhere to be found, but who actively tried to impede and thwart America's efforts. This is a grave moment and a sad one.

But the thing that I think you want to hear from me is some description of the character of the man who is at the center of this crisis, on whose decisions everything turns. What kind of man is George W. Bush and how does one know him? Let me give you my background on this. I had never met George Bush before I went to work for him in January of 2001. I was a journalist and a writer. I had no connection with the Bush family and, in fact, I hadn't been that big of a supporter of him in the campaign. I had preferred him to the alternatives. He seemed to be the best in show. But, unlike my children, I was unable to muster much enthusiasm for him. I was very surprised when his staff invited me and I hesitated a great deal about taking the job, for many reasons. Part of it was that I wasn't sure I was going to like speechwriting, but more of it was I wasn't sure about this man for whom I was to write.

In the course of working for him, I came to have a new understanding and appreciation for the kind of person he is—a very unusual kind of political figure. He is a good man who is not a weak man. We are not used to seeing personal goodness express itself through personal strength. But it has to, because if you subscribe to this pop psychology that *goodness* is the same thing as *niceness* or *affability* or being easygoing, then you're acquiescing to the idea that somehow *wrong* is going

to be stronger than *good*. And that can't be true.

He is a person of tremendous discipline and focus. Probably the most important thing to understand right now is that President Bush is a person of decision. Let me tell you a little story about this. I was at a function in Washington shortly after I went to work for President Bush and I was seated at a table beside the ambassador from a friendly, second-tier country, not one of the great powers. He met President Bush, but he also had spent a lot of time meeting with some of the past presidents, including President Clinton. I asked him how he would compare the presidents he's known. And he said:

Your President Clinton, he was really something. What a mind, what a mind. I went to see him once when we had a very important matter affecting our country. The president of my country came and we went to the Oval Office to see him together, and we had a decision we needed him to make and it had to be made right then and there. Clinton knew all about the history of our country. He knew all about its economic system. He talked a little bit about its great writers, great musicians, and artists. He talked a little bit about the climate. He was very, very impressive. But, I looked at my watch and I noticed that as the minutes were ticking away, we were running out of time for him to make this decision.

The punch line of this story was that the whole point of this show of virtuosity was to avoid the decision. President Clinton, I'm sure, knew a

very impressive amount about the history and economics and climate and art of this country, but compared to the people who actually know a lot, he's not a specialist. We don't hire presidents to be experts on each and every one of the 150-odd countries in the world. They have people for that. We don't hire them to be experts on the space program or on infectious diseases and certainly not in all of these things put together, because no human being could possibly do that. We hire them to staff an administration made up of experts on each of the infinite areas of human knowledge. And then, when problems come up in these areas, to use these experts as the basis for their job, which is to make the decisions.

The reason making decisions is hard is that decisions are often wrong. Decisions, when they are wrong, have consequences and those consequences are hard enough to bear if you're in private life, to have anybody in your circle saying you were wrong and you made a mistake. But to be the most visible person in the world and to make a decision that goes wrong, this is a terrifying possibility. We have had presidents who, when confronted with this possibility, have decided that the best way out is not to make the decision at all and hope that things turn out for the best. And that is how we came to be where we are in the Middle East. We are paying now the price of ten years of not making decisions and we now have some big decisions to make.

September 11, it's often said, changed President Bush. I think there's some truth to that. How could it not?

One of the jobs that a president has in a time of national tragedy and disaster is to meet with the mourners, to meet with people who have been bereaved. I had just a little glimpse of what this is like.

About three weeks after 9/11, the president and first lady invited to the White House the families of the passengers aboard Flight 93, the plane that crashed in the Pennsylvania countryside. The number of family members was probably something like 200 or 300 people. The reason for this special invitation was that, at that time, we did not know where that plane was heading. I think most people now think it was probably heading toward the Capitol, but it was unclear at the time whether it was heading toward the Capitol or the White House. So the brave men who forced that plane to earth at the sacrifice of their own lives had quite possibly saved the White House and the lives of many or all of the people who worked inside the White House.

Before the lunch President Bush sent a note around that said it might be appropriate if the staff who could spare the time would stand along the interior colonnade that links the mansion to the East Wing and say something or shake hands with the families as they left the lunch. As it turned out, about 200 of the 600 staff made it. We were issued little paper American flags to hold. But the day did not go as I thought it would. President Bush is famous for his punctuality, so I thought the lunch would end at two o'clock and the guests would be leaving between two and two-ten and by two-

ten, they would all be cleared out. That's not how it happened. This was one of those rare events where President Bush decided that he was going to stay as long as the guests wanted to talk to him and shake his hand

The families came out in groups. Two or three or four or eight people would talk to the president and the first lady and then they would leave. There'd be a long pause and then another two or three or four or eight would come out and they filed past us. They filed past, these faces etched in disbelieving sorrow, because it was still so new. Those of you who have been through a grief know there is a long period where you can't quite take on board that you're never going to see your husband or your wife or your father, your mother, your son, your daughter ever again. And there they were. They came past all of us and they'd shake our hands limply, not paying any attention to us. This went on for an hour. People on the staff were looking at their shoes. You could see people's Adam's apples bobbing around. People would suddenly disappear and go into this little rose garden behind the colonnade and they'd disappear, just sit there on one of the benches. They couldn't bear it. That lunch was for two hundred, three hundred people. The president probably met 9,000, 10,000 people like that. They didn't want anything from *us*. All *we* had to do was shake their hand, maybe say a sentence that they didn't hear. President Bush had to actually take on a large portion of their grief *himself*.

We had a president who liked to say, "I share your pain." After watching people in pain, I thought, what an arrogant thing to say. You can't share pain. Believe me, if you could, the people in that hall would have been glad to give it to us. It's theirs. You can't have even a piece of it. All you can do is say to them that you try to understand them and feel with them and their country understands and remembers and will avenge. That would change a person.

But in another way, 9/11 did not change him. The characteristics of President Bush, his willingness to make decisions, to take risks, his imagination and boldness were salient parts of his personality from the beginning.

After 9/11, American foreign policy makers and foreign policy makers throughout the world had to make a decision about the kind of war that the 9/11 war would be. I outlined in *The Right Man* what I thought of as a way to think of these two alternatives. I compared it to the American Civil War. Terrorism was not the work of just nineteen hijackers and the twentieth who didn't show up. It was not the work of just Osama bin Laden and his raggedy henchman. Terror came out of the whole diseased political system of the Middle East. It has become a normal part of the politics of that region, often deployed against the United States, sometimes deployed against other countries. Recently, for example, the governments of Turkey and Iran had a dispute over water rights in the upper parts of the rivers that run from Turkey into Iran. They couldn't quite settle on

who got what quota. And after a month or two of haggling, bombs began going off in downtown Ankara. That's just the way business is done.

That is the problem that President Bush confronted. To deal with this problem means making big changes in the Middle East, potentially. During the Civil War, there were two approaches to the problem of solving secession, one epitomized by General McClellan, who is falsely remembered as a coward. He wasn't a coward. McClellan believed the greatest danger of the Civil War was the danger that too radical a war would destroy the social system of the South. He wanted to wage a very limited war aimed at the precise decision makers in the South, with the idea of pulling the South back into the Union unchanged, with slavery still intact. His slogan was: **the Union as it was, the Constitution as it is**. He was prepared to accept that the risk of this limited war, this little war, was the risk of defeat and that the South might actually get away. He preferred to see the South get away rather than to change the South.

The alternative was the big war. The advocate of that was Ulysses S. Grant, whose slogan was: **victory at all costs**. If pulling the South back into the Union meant destroying the old way of life in the South, so be it. The Union was everything, the Southern way of life not so important. If he had to destroy slavery to save the Union, he accepted the destruction of slavery—cheerfully and willingly, because Grant was more of an abolitionist than probably most of the people in Washington.

This is very much the choice we face in the Middle East now. There are people who advocate a limited war aimed at just a few terrorists. The reason they advocate that, the reason they oppose the president's commitment on Iraq, is because they are terrified of the changes that such a war will bring to the Middle East. Their slogan is: **the Middle East as it was**. They say we have to deal with terrorism, but only to the extent that it does not change the Middle East as it was. If that ultimately means defeat, just like McClellan, they're prepared to accept it.

Then there are people—and this is the view that the president has consistently supported—who say we must deal with this evil entirely, to the end. If that means taking apart the Middle East as it was and rebuilding it, so be it. Not that we are volunteering for that job, not that we aspire to it, not that we are happy to have these responsibilities, but we are not going to leave this evil intact. We are not going to accept a war that ends in only partial success. And the president has consistently backed that point of view in every instance. I honor him for that, because I think that's the right choice. It's the hard choice, it's the dangerous choice, it's the choice that puts his presidency on the line, but it's the right choice.

President Bush spent the summer of 2001 in Crawford, Texas, on his last long holiday. He was visiting with a group of children in the gym of one of the Crawford elementary schools. One of the children asked him if he finds it difficult to make decisions. He said, "No, not really, because if you know

your own mind, you know the decisions to make.” And he said, “If, as president, you’re wrong, the American people send you back to Crawford.” He said that wasn’t the worst thing he could imagine. That’s the president I worked for and I am proud to have done it.

In September of 2002, President Bush met in the Oval Office with half a dozen clergymen to talk about prayer. He had a very intimate conversation with them—more intimate than the president usually allows. One of the clergymen said to him, “Mr. President, what has prayer meant to you personally?” The president said, “I used to have a drinking problem. In fact, by rights, I should be sitting now on a barstool in Texas and not here in this office. The only reason I am here is because of the power of prayer and how it changed my life.” One of the other clergymen asked him what he does when he prays? Does he like to read some inspirational text; does he look at the Psalms, maybe, the way a lot of people do? And the president said, yes, he liked to read the Psalms and, in fact, Psalm 27 was his favorite. And if you know your Psalms, you know that Psalm 27 is a psalm of heartrending loneliness and remorse. It describes someone who feels that his mother and his father have turned their backs on him, and he is entirely alone in the world and is terrified that even God almighty will turn away from him. And it talks about his awareness of being alone with his enemies and his determination not to give in to them.

As this religious leader told me this story, I thought of the story of the

Psalms. According to tradition, King David wrote the Psalms. You may remember the story of how King David happened to become king of Israel. The prophet Samuel received a message from God that a man named Jesse, a farmer, had sons, and one of those sons was to be the next king of Israel. So, Samuel made his visit to Jesse and brought him the good news. Jesse was, of course, delighted and produced seven sons, each of them strong and fit and muscular and handsome, good war leader, ready for anything. And Samuel looked at these seven men and said, no, it’s not any of these. Do you have any more children? And Jesse said, well, I do have one other son, but he’s kind of scrawny and not of much account. We use him to tend the goats. And Samuel said to bring him. Samuel heard a voice say: this is he.

That’s how I—a great skeptic of President Bush—came to feel at the end. President Bush, George W. Bush, was not an obvious man for the job of president of the United States, a very unlikely man for the presidency of the United States, but he happened, by a very strange fate, to be exactly the right man.

***Following his speech, David Frum took questions from his American Experiment audience.***

**Mark Sellner:** You were talking about how decisive the president is, but over the last eighteen months, we’re not seeing any immediate victories. Doesn’t it look like the administration is indecisive?

**Frum:** First of all, I would disagree that you have not seen victories. You have not seen a major terrorist attack on American soil. That's maybe just because we got lucky. Maybe it's because the terrorists decided they wanted to stop hurting the United States. Or maybe that reflects extraordinary efforts on the part of many people that you're never going to know about. And maybe the way to think of it is, every day that something bad does not happen on American soil is a day of victory. We have seen the arrest or killing of a series of terrorist leaders, culminating with Khalid Sheik Mohammad. Those are victories, too. And they are pretty dramatic ones.

On Iraq, the president is decisive. But one of the decisions that he made may have been a bad decision. He made a decision in October that he preferred to wage this war with a bigger coalition, very much including Britain. And he then decided, out of respect for the British, to follow their advice about how to approach this in the United Nations. It may turn about to be a bad decision—I'm not saying the president is always right. Nobody is. Maybe one of the ways you can judge somebody's decisiveness is to compare them to other people. Compare President Bush to Democratic commentators, people at the *New York Times* like Thomas Friedman or Democratic politicians like Richard Holbrooke. These are nobody's fools, they are not unaware of the difficulties of things. Watch their position over that first eighteen months. First, **no** to Iraq. Then **yes** to Iraq, but only if we go to the Security

Council. Then, **no**, the Security Council was a mistake and now they're saying **no, forget the whole thing**. In the course of this, what we see is that the president has been following a particular line in a very coherent way. As I said, I'm not promising you it's right, but he has been following a commitment he made to the very end. And he made a commitment to Tony Blair that he was going to follow the Security Council process through to the end.

Before he became president of the United States, Ronald Reagan had gone around the country eating chicken with conservatives for twenty years. There was probably not an important conservative in the country who had not eaten chicken with Ronald Reagan by the time Ronald Reagan became president. So, they felt they knew him and they knew exactly what he would do and what he would not do. George Bush's political career has been much shorter than that. He was elected governor of Texas in 1994 and he didn't really emerge as a clear national figure until about 1997 or 1998. And that's a fairly short time in which to eat chicken—and there are more conservatives now. So, people often don't feel that they're 100 percent certain of what he will do and of what he won't do and there are moments of panic.

I remember one very vividly, and I wrote about it in the book. In May of 2002, suddenly it became conventional wisdom in Washington that, **aw, forget it. He's not doing Iraq. Yeah, he said it in the Axis of Evil speech, but he's changed his mind, he's going wobbly. It's just not his nature**. But he persisted. And he was

persisting in May and he's persisting now. And the one thing, I remember saying last May, I don't know whether this is going to happen, I don't know whether there will be shooting. There may not be. There may be some diplomatic solution that was imaginable at the time. The one thing I do know is that in January 2005, there will not be a Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. I know that. I don't know how it will be got rid of, but I know it won't be there. That is one thing you can feel pretty sure about.

**Mitch Pearlstein:** What was it about him that led at least some folks to start building his 2000 presidential campaign and candidacy?

**Frum:** Two things. It was certainly the implosion of the national Washington Republican Party that helped to make him one of the logical figures. Back in 1997, 1998, Newt Gingrich thought he was going to be running for president in the year 2000. There might have been some people who doubted that, but it certainly seemed like a possibility. The results of the '98 Congressional election, the Clinton impeachment, and then the ascendancy of Bill Clinton over the Congressional Republicans in 1999, just demolished the possibilities for all the Republicans in Washington. It was going to have to be somebody outside. The Republican Party is a very logical party. When they're looking for a presidential candidate their first thought is, is there anybody in Washington who can be the standard-bearer? No? OK, which is the biggest state with a repub-

lican governor? California got a Republican? No. Does Texas? Yes? OK, well, let's go look at him. And there's kind of a process of elimination.

Also, something happens when people meet him. Like me, many usually came in expecting little. They've heard the stories about his wild past and they've heard the stories about his troubles with the English language, and so they were looking for sort of a party-hearty frat guy, probably not too bright. It's an amazing thing to say about the president of the United States, but George Bush still gets a little bit of stage fright when he's in front of a crowd, a little bit—especially if there's just a camera and no people from whom he can draw strength. So, he sometimes stumbles when he's in front of an audience. But, you put him in a room and suddenly people were asking who this commanding figure is and how come I haven't seen him before? People would come and have that experience. And there was this famous episode where George Shultz went to meet him. George Shultz is one of the all-time great figures in American politics. Shultz came out of his meeting with George W. Bush and said this guy has the potential to be our next Ronald Reagan. And he had that impact on person after person who met him in those months in 1997, 1998, and 1999.

There's a wonderful story about George Shultz that when he was secretary of state, whenever ambassadors would finish the confirmation process, they'd have lunch in the secretary's office, where Shultz had this giant globe. And Shultz would walk over to

the globe after lunch and spin it. And then, as it was moving, he would say to the ambassador, show me where your country is. And the ambassador would stop the globe and he'd look around for Lower Slobovia and he would triumphantly find it, because he was afraid that the secretary might not think he was that clever, put his finger on Lower Slobovia and say, here it is, and then Shultz would then pick up his finger and move it over to the United States and say, no, here it is. Which is something that ambassadors do tend to forget.

**Maureen Pranghofer:** If we do go to war with Iraq and there is retaliatory terrorism here, do you think that will be looked upon as a wrong decision?

**Frum:** I don't think one can think about terrorism as being in any way retaliatory. We know these major terrorist incidents are planned eighteen months, twenty-four months in advance. That's how long 9/11 took, that's how long the millennium plot in 2000—which was fortunately intercepted—took. So, if something terrible happens tomorrow, that will be the product of something set in motion eighteen to twenty-four months ago. But, I think it is true, when you're in a war, that you have to anticipate that your enemy will do things. It is possible that they may use a terror weapon against the United States. But with any decision, with any decision the president makes, after the decision is made, we all know the advantages and disadvantages, the right and wrong of that decision. What we never get to see are the advantages and disadvantages of

the alternative. You never get to see what would have happened had the decision not been made.

If the question you ask is a valid one—if there is a terrorist attack after an Iraq war, did it happen because of the Iraq decision? I think then, it's equally fair to look at what happened on 9/11 and to ask if that happened because of the Iraq non-decisions of the past ten years? If President Clinton had acted on Iraq in 1993, when we caught them attempting to assassinate the elder George Bush, would there have been a 9/11? If he had acted promptly and decisively at the beginning of his presidency? I don't know that we'll know the answer to that question any more than we'll know the answer to the one you raise.

**Rick Rice:** Do you think that with Dick Cheney's health, he'll run as a vice presidential candidate in 2004? And, if not, who would replace him, and what is his role in the White House?

**Frum:** I think Dick Cheney's health is actually better than it was a year ago. These modern pacemakers really work. My father-in-law has the same pacemaker as Dick Cheney does and he's still beating me at tennis. I think, absolutely, unless there were to be some major event in Dick Cheney's health, it is very hard for me to imagine him not running in 2004. I think Dick Cheney's view is that he would rather die at his desk than die fishing, so he will want to stay. The president values his advice. Cheney's role is not as decisive as is sometimes suggested, but he is very

important. Because that is the one person around George Bush who has been through all of these decisions before, but he has also made it clear that he has no ambitions of his own beyond what he's got. He's not running for president. Dick Cheney—uniquely among modern vice presidents—is one of the most powerful vice presidents ever, but he has no political staff. He has had one communications aide, Mary Matlin, and she left and he didn't replace her. And he has a speechwriter, but the speechwriter, named John McConnell, who was a Bush speechwriter during the campaign, now, in fact, spends most of his time again writing for the president, since Cheney basically likes to speak off-the-cuff for himself. He's got no pollsters, nothing. And that gives him a lot of clout. So, I would anticipate, barring some catastrophic health event for him, that he will be on the ticket in 2004, which means it will be wide, wide open in 2008.

**Alice Kreitz:** I know that we're all aware of the billions offered to Turkey to defend that country and they have not yet succumbed, but I'm wondering, in the Security Council negotiations now, if we're also offering billions to other countries to get on board with our request?

**Frum:** I think the Turks get a bit of a bum rap on this money question. Yes, they have asked for aid. But in 1991 the United States made a decision not to go for the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime but to use a system of sanctions and covert action against Iraq, including, above all, trade sanctions

that closed off Iraq's trade. This policy, which, at the time, was thought likely to last only a year or two before the regime collapsed and was replaced, has, in fact, now lasted over twelve years, with enormous cost to the Turkish economy. They have borne the economic pain of America's misjudgment in 1991 about how long Saddam Hussein would last.

The consequences to them of another war in the region are economically very great, and Turkey is not a rich country. I don't think it's completely unreasonable of them to ask for help. One more thing the Turks might want to say is they've applied to the European Union and that this is very important to the future of the country. Many Europeans want to keep them out. The French have said that they will oppose the adhesion to Europe of any country that supports the United States. The Turks face grave economic threats if they're locked out of Europe. They are taking some risks for us. I don't think it's completely unreasonable for them to ask for something in return. Turkey has been a long-time recipient of American aid; I don't think it's shocking that they would want to know what the future of that aid is. I don't see that as a bribe. I see that as compensating them for some economic injuries that we are asking them to sustain on our behalf.

As for the others on the Security Council and elsewhere, they are making sacrifices. The Romanians, for example, have offered a detachment of chemical warfare troops, 400 men.

They know a lot about chemical warfare because the Warsaw Pact had those weapons. They are taking real risks and they are taking the risk of being terrorist targets themselves. So, I think there's a kind of sniffish mood that you hear among some of the liberal press toward America's allies. It is really unbecoming.

I recently debated Hubert Vedrine, who was the former French foreign minister and a nasty piece of work. Early in the debate he said we need a stronger Europe to stand off against the United States. Then later in the debate, he referred to these "bribed" and "coerced" states that have joined the American coalition. I said to him, Mr. Vedrine, you talk about a stronger Europe. How is Europe going to become stronger when people in Italy, Portugal, Bulgaria, Romania, Estonia, Lithuanian, and Latvia—the majority of European countries who are supporting the United States—when they hear that the leaders of the great French republic regard them as bribed and coerced? This is no way to talk.

I think we can pay a lot of money—a lot more money than anybody dreams of offering to all of the states in the American coalition—before we get to even 10 percent, in real terms relative to the economy, of what we gave France between 1945 and 1952.

**Gene Olson:** Having some familiarity with the term *Axis of Evil*, as I suspect you might, could you please comment on those three countries, both in terms of which you feel the administration looks at as most critical

and why? Second, which you feel may be the most dangerous and why?

**Frum:** Let me take the first part and leave the second part, because I think it's probably more interesting and useful for me to talk about what I think the administration thinks than what I think personally. When you approach dangers, there are a number of ways of drawing up your list of priorities. You can say, which is the greatest danger, which is the most urgent danger, and which is the danger where we are likeliest to succeed? People often criticize President Bush for emphasizing Iraq and say that he should be emphasizing North Korea instead. And those, by the way, are the same people who, like schoolyard bullies throwing a kid's hat back and forth, if President Bush were dealing with North Korea would be telling him no, no, no, you should be dealing with Iraq, because their basic point of view is you should do nothing ever anywhere, just like President Clinton did.

It's probably true that the Iranian danger is the greatest. Iran, unlike Iraq, is a cohesive country with a sense of nationalism and a coherent history. They've got some linguistic and ethnic minorities, but everyone speaks one language, there's a clear idea of what it means to be an Iranian and there has been for a long time. It's a country that was able to wage war very effectively without foreign aid, which Iraq in the 1980s showed it could not do. It would have lost the war without foreign support. And the Iranian regime is really aggressive and is an

acknowledged terrorist on a worldwide scale. The Argentines, for example, have just filed charges against the Iranian government because of the bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994, the bombing that killed more than 100 people. They have wiretaps of people in the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires working in conjunction with Hezbollah, which is sort of a cutout group for the Iranian government.

It may be that the most urgent danger is North Korea, because they are probably the danger where you are likeliest to achieve a dramatic success, where you can make a difference fastest. That's why, I think, in many ways the president's eyes are drawn to Iraq. Because it is very possible to believe that the American success in Iraq will be quick, it certainly will be quick, and it will have a large impact on the whole political culture of the Middle East in a way that North Korea, which is not part of the Middle East, and Iran, which is not an Arab country, might not have.

*The New York Times Magazine* carried a very interesting profile of a young, unemployed Jordanian man who hates America and wants to be a suicide bomber. Actually, there are two things he wants. Ambition number one is to be a suicide bomber. Ambition number two is to become an illegal immigrant to the United States and try to find a job as a computer programmer at Microsoft. Lunatic, right? But also deeply true about the way human beings are.

One of the reasons that he can believe this is because he does not have to absorb into his mind how he can believe that America is his greatest enemy and the enemy to people like him, because he has never had to reckon in a real way with what has been done in the name of the ideologies that he thinks he's committed to. When they take the lid off Iraq and we hear what's been going on, it's going to have an impact. If World War II had ended in a negotiated settlement of some kind, the Nazis would not have become a byword for evil. The reason the Nazis came to epitomize evil is because we saw what Nazi Germany did. The reason that the Soviets have a somewhat better reputation than the Nazis is that the lid was never really taken off.

I think that the president has in mind that going into Iraq is a way of protecting America—not just from the immediate danger of weapons of mass destruction, but from ideological dangers. We can, through Iraq, change minds in the region. We can show them what Saddam Hussein is, what he did, and we can discredit the ideas that produced him. Perhaps we can convert large numbers of people to the idea that this kind of extremist, anti-Westernism is not the way of the future, that it's better to be a computer programmer at Microsoft than a suicide bomber.

**Ann Kenefick:** I have a son who was, two weeks ago, a captain of a Northwest Airlines plane. He is now in the Middle East. It's still a little hard. He has three children. We hear from him. And what we're concerned about

now is that the morale of the men who have been there for a while is slowly sinking. The heat is rising and by April, it will be 116 to 120 and they're in tents with sand blowing. I'm concerned about the health of the men and wonder how long they'll be there.

**Frum:** God bless your son, and we all thank him. As for how long it can go, I can't answer that question. I don't know. I suppose, had the president been unwise enough to ask me for advice, I would have been in the camp with those who said, Tony Blair's making a terrible mistake, go in October. That's not the decision. He decided to give America's traditional friendships one last test. I think he made the decision that this war can still be fought and won in March, obviously with more difficulty and with more suffering and more costs on American families. I mean psychic costs. I don't think we're going to see a lot of casualties. But it can still be fought and won in March.

Here's the last thought about what kind of man President Bush is. Remember at the end of this great speech he gave to the joint session of Congress on September 20? The final thing was he produced this badge that had belonged to a police officer. The body of this policeman had never been found, but they did find this metal badge and they gave it to the policeman's mother—his sole survivor. When she met the president on September 14, she took the badge and she pressed it into his hands and said, there's no other family, it's just me, and I want you to have this

badge, my son's last memento. President Bush put it in his pocket. And at the end of the September 20 speech he told the story of how he was given this and said, we're all going to have something to remind us of this day. We'll all carry some scar. I will carry this.

The last time I saw President Bush was my last day in the White House (you get your goodbye photograph) and I said to him, I'm just curious, do you still have it? He pulled it from his breast pocket and said: "Here it is." I'm sure it's still there, and I'm sure he looks at it all the time. I think that's the key to his success with the American public. When you do the polls and you ask Americans what do you think of his stand on this or that issue, he usually comes in around 40 to 45 percent. But when you then ask, what do you think about him? He's been at 60 percent consistently since 9/11, at least 60, often as high as 90, but never lower than 60 since 9/11.

That's because Americans trust him to feel about things the way they want their president to feel about them and to think about things the way they want their president to think about them, even if, in the end, he doesn't make the decision that they would necessarily make if they were in his shoes. As I have said, I honor him for that, and I think you can feel confident that your son is in good hands. ■