

The Image of George Bush

The Triumph and Collapse of a Pseudo-Presidency

By Mike Habegger

“The American citizen thus lives in a world where fantasy is more real than reality, where the image has more dignity than the original. [...] When images have become more vivid than their originals, it is only natural that we should commonly prefer to speak of the more vivid copy. [...] More important than what we think of a presidential candidate, is what we think of his ‘public image.’ We vote for him because he is the kind of public image we want to see in the White House.”

Daniel J. Boorstin

“The image is made to order. It is tailored to us. If a corporation’s image of itself or a man’s image of himself is not useful, it is discarded.”

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Senior Seminar – American Politics in the 21st Century

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This shouldn't come as a surprise

The world has entered a mode of discourse that might be classified as the postmodern, which is characterized by the proliferation of post-industrial capitalism through the medium of the image transmitted over information superhighways. Constructed images have replaced enlightened meanings, absolutes, and ideals. Power is perpetuated through the market that competes for the loyalties of consumers, by selling cultural commodities. Politics, as a subset of this discourse, is not separate from this cultural market. Thus, the carefully constructed image has become a form of political communication between the producers—politicians and the government—and the consumers—the voting public. George W. Bush is not the first in a long line of postmodern presidents. But the model of Jefferson and Lincoln—of rational representative politics—is dead.

Much has been made of the second Bush administration being the most tight-lipped presidency since Richard Nixon sat in the Oval Office. Instead of real information and real explanation, journalists and citizens are force-fed a carefully constructed sound bite everyday and every hour in an attempt to keep everyone in the administration and by extension, the GOP, (and by further extension—America) *on message*. Among many others, Karen Hughes, who held the title of “counselor to the president” from 2001-2002 and later returned as an advisor during the 2004 presidential race, was the main proponent of the strategy of keeping everyone on the same page,¹ a program that was largely successful in meeting its goal of the manipulation of public sentiment. It was welcomed by the Bush White House.

¹ Draper, Robert. 35. *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush*. 2007.

According to renowned journalist Ron Suskind, during the election of 2004 Americans were fundamentally faced with a choice: Kerry or Bush. But on another level, they were faced with a choice between the possible restoration of the real world—the reality-based community—and the image based, simulated presidency.² *The message* had taken over not only of the mode of communication between the government and its people, but also the election of the regime itself.³ Voters had to decide which candidate would communicate the right message to the rest of the world, notably those people who were constantly trying to kill us. Which man would project the correct type of message to them? It was a conflict between the “reality-based community” and the “faith-based presidency”; it was a conflict defined by those at the top of the administration⁴; it was something never before seen in U.S. politics.

To obscure the stakes of such a choice, every effort was made to manipulate and intimidate the press for favorable coverage,⁵ through trial balloon and leaking, staged media spectacles, town halls, presidential press conferences, and the unwillingness to ever fully answer a legitimate question for National Security reasons. For certain, message control and manipulation is not peculiar to the Bush presidency. All presidents have attempted to dictate what the public should and should not know, but this trend has accelerated with the development of radio, TV, and other forms of electronic media. It has also paved the way for the *image* to take the throne as the Great Communicator.

² Suskind, Ron. “Without a Doubt.” *The New York Times Magazine*. 2004.

³ Suskind, Ron. *The One Percent Doctrine*. 2006. 325.

⁴ Suskind, Ron. “Without a Doubt.”

⁵ Gore, Al. 125.