

Reviewed by Dr Robert Crowcroft, Research Associate, UK Defence Forum

If one is being honest, political memoirs rarely make for exciting reading. Either they are structured badly, taking the reader on a tedious chronological narrative – Bill Clinton's being the best example of this type – or the prose style is somewhat lacking – take Tony Blair's *The Journey* as a case in point. Whereas I found the first two hundred pages of the Blair book enjoyable and most of the rest fairly turgid, the memoirs of George W. Bush, 43rd President of the United States, remain enjoyable throughout.

The prose is engaging, and the structure clearly the subject of much consideration. Bush chose to focus on key 'decisions' in his life and use this as a thematic device to provide the book's content. If this means that a great deal is left out, it makes for a better book. The 'decisions' that Bush opts to concentrate on extend from his decision to quit drinking, running for office, stem cell research, his huge increase in HIV/AIDS support, Katrina, and the War on Terror. Bush is, of course, the subject of much derision but has been widely compared to Harry S. Truman: another man who left office under a cloud but eventually came to be seen as having been right all along. As Bush admits in the book, he is aware of the analogy and hopeful that people may one day view him in the same light as Truman.

When discussing George W. Bush, I always wonder why people hate him so much. The Democrat party stalwarts on the East and West coasts despise him for being a conservative and, even more so, for being from Texas. His background is a reason why the Western European Left hate Bush also. He may as well be from Mars, what with his earthy manner, frontier-speak, cowboy boots, and lack of the moral ambiguity that the cosmopolitan classes think it so necessary to bask in. He is widely lampooned for 'Bushisms', slips of the tongue that often involved making up brand new words. Yet that always seemed to me a consequence of his dislike of speaking to an assembled audience; tellingly, Bush never makes such mistakes when conversing with a single interviewer in a one-to-one situation. Seeing Bush as a moron became the norm, even a sign of one's own sophistication; but one wonders if this was based on evidence or, rather, a reflexive tendency to swallow anything produced by the liberal media and recite it as 'truth'. As is so often the case, then, the lazy thinking of those who read the *Guardian* and *New York Times* should be chortled at rather than taken seriously.

Readers interested in foreign affairs will not be disappointed in this book; Bush is, self-consciously, a wartime president, and the struggle against Islamic fundamentalism represents the core of his memoirs. I should declare here a degree of bias. In my opinion, Bush was a gifted strategist who directed America towards a highly successful grand strategy in a range of theatres. If one were to follow a sensible rule of thumb in these matters that I have in these matters – that if the Democrat party and the European Left dislike you, you are probably a

winner – then Bush is one of the most important and successful leaders of the last century. Meanwhile his administration was the most intellectually gifted government for decades.

The proof of Bush's recipe is in the pudding – Barack Obama has followed the Bush strategy, albeit not quite as successfully as its instigator. Despite Obama's rhetorical denunciations of Bush while on the campaign trail, during his period in office only the mood music of US foreign policy has changed. That is enough for the unsophisticated observer, but keener minds should not be fooled. It is not an exaggeration to say that, in Obama, George W. Bush lives on. There is more. I believe that future presidents will follow the Bush blueprint for the foreseeable future. In that respect, it is not too daring to conclude even at this early juncture that Bush will eventually be seen as Truman is now.

Bush's account of 9/11 is simply gripping: the fear, the anger, and the uncertainty leap off the page. Up on Air Force One, he was fed information on every conceivable rumour, and one wonders how on earth decisions were made in the fog of war. Rather him than me. Bush describes his visit to Ground Zero and promise to the firefighters that Al-Qaeda would be made to pay. The emotions of that day still impact him deeply. And his disdain is obvious for those who, within a few years, forgot the shock and anger of that day and, in consequence, forgot the potential threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism to the Western world. From 2004 until 2008 Bush essentially had to wade through treacle as America, and the world, moved on. This was an experience that he found highly frustrating. Throughout the book, Bush repeatedly returns to the theme of conversations he had with the families of the fallen, an experience that weighs heavily upon him but which also acted as a source of strength, alongside his family and his faith.

Bush fretted constantly about another attack on the American mainland. He knew that if there was an atrocity that could have been prevented with the necessary legal mechanisms – particularly regarding the surveillance of people within the United States – he would be blamed; yet if the intelligence agencies foiled those attacks, his measures would appear an overreaction. Bush himself writes that 'If I had to summarise my most meaningful accomplishment as president in one sentence', it would be that 'after the nightmare of September 11, America went seven and a half years without another successful terrorist attack on our soil'.

One of the most controversial parts of the book relate to Bush's authorisation of interrogation techniques which some believe constitute torture, especially waterboarding. Bush is unapologetic in acknowledging that he believed the measures to be necessary and that they did not amount to torture. 'Torture' is such a nebulous concept that one man's torture is another man's common sense. Certainly one imagines that if waterboarding terrorist suspects (which actually only happened to three people) was presented as a policy option to the man on the street, the likely response would be 'too right'. Ordinary people have eye-watering and reactionary views on terrorism, crime, and law and order, and simply do not share the outrage on these matters voiced by the cosmopolitan Left. (Anyone who has heard working class, or lower middle class people talk about dealing with the IRA or Muslim radicals will know the truth of this point.)

Nevertheless, the issue of interrogation does present a legal and ethical problem. Those

interested in the subject should consult Philip Bobbitt's masterful *Terror and Consent* (2008). Bobbitt is a hawkish Democrat and one of the sharpest minds around. He argues that the boundary between 'interrogation' and 'torture' should be clearly demarcated, and things deemed to constitute 'torture' then banned – except in the nightmare 'ticking bomb' scenario, when torture could safely be used on the grounds that the public would loudly support doing whatever is necessary.

One final point on interrogation. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal was clearly unacceptable. However one must be sceptical as to how genuinely outraged Islamic opinion was on the matter. After all, treatment far worse than that is meted out perfectly routinely in the Muslim world; a few US soldiers misbehaving was an exception, whereas in that part of the globe it is the norm. While it is reasonable for Western opinion to be dismayed, too many people fell for the Islamist propaganda line of phoney outrage. Whatever sincerity there was to the anger presumably centred on the fact that Abu Ghraib saw non-Muslims torturing Muslims, rather than the act of torture per se.

In truth there are previous few revelations in this book. Bush offers a narrative account of the Afghan war, the decision to confront Saddam Hussein, the conflict in Iraq, and the aftermath. One of the more interesting tidbits is that after ordering a fifty percent troop increase in Afghanistan in late 2006 (a 'silent surge' that attracted little attention compared to the surge in Iraq), in late 2008 Bush had a fresh strategy drawn up for Afghanistan, which was then quietly passed on to the incoming Democrat government and claimed as an Obama innovation – the so-called McChrystal plan. Bush is justifiably proud of his decision to order a surge into Iraq in 2007, confounding the Left and 'realists' alike who favoured an American withdrawal, the partitioning of the country, and turning over the Middle East to the Iranian-Syrian alignment. Can one imagine how deleterious the geopolitical situation in the Middle East would be in 2010 if Bush had followed the policies urged on him by James Baker and Joe Biden? Thankfully, Bush was more sophisticated than that.

As one should expect, one has to read between the lines in *Decision Points*. Strategies in foreign policy are not the kind of thing that can be discussed openly; they permit the enemy to understand what you are doing and gauge likely responses. A survey of the realities of American foreign policy between 2001 and 2009, considering the US's place within the international system, is far more instructive than the partisan anti-Bush rhetoric of so many observers.

I would argue that the US position within the international system improved markedly between 2001 and 2009. This is of course not the conventional wisdom, which sees Bush as displaying rather conspicuous hubris and leading American power into rapid, probably permanent, decline. But the thesis that US power declined sharply post-2003 is predicated on the 1990s assumption that US power was unlimited (so, 2003 becomes a point of contrast). In fact, whatever people in the 1990s imagined to be the case, US power was never unlimited (take Iraq 1991-2003, the problems of the Balkans and peacekeeping, and North Korea), and, crucially, American interest in most problems was, and remains, rhetorical or reluctant. The US does not need to bother, most of the time. If there is one thing America is lacking it is will, not strength. And the reason they often don't have the desire to put their shoulder to the wheel and solve problems is that,

when you are Goliath, you don't have to.

While a redistribution of power within the system in the twenty-first century is inevitable, US power has not declined as yet (and, if anything, has been enhanced by the policies of the Bush administration). Relative overall power will decline with the rise of new powers, but the American geopolitical position has been significantly enhanced; given the drift of US policy in the Pacific, shifting burdens to indigenous states like Japan and India and engagement with China, this position of strength is likely to grow rather than diminish in subsequent decades. The truth is that America was never as strong, or as interested in the world as most thought, and is now not as weak as many imagine.

After 2003, then, US power did not go into freefall; quite the reverse. All that happened was that the realities of the post-Cold War world – and the true extent of US strength, flexibility, and discretion to act – simply become clearer. George W. Bush loosened the United States from its Cold War-era moorings. In addition, the Bush policy was more cautious and less unilateral than often charged. Certainly, Bush was far less unilateralist than the 'internationalist' Bill Clinton had been. But the Bush presidency did throw into sharp relief the extraordinary weakness of other major powers on the world stage.

So what did Bush do? Well, in a short summary, Afghanistan was invaded and, since then, America has held its nerve to build up the government and combat the insurgency. It seems unlikely that the US will withdraw its forces until the Karzai government can fight the insurgents alone, for the most part; and special forces will remain in the country to combat international terrorism. In Iraq, Bush ensured that the US finally found the determination to resolve the Saddam problem and, thereafter, calmly worked to build up the central state, hold the ring, support peace, and disarm and defeat insurgents. The future for Iraq is unclear but the two wars in the country (to remove Saddam; and then against the sectarian extremists, particularly the Al-Qaeda network) were successful. The defeat of Al-Qaeda in Iraq signalled the ability of the US to choke off a terrorist insurgency and deny it its objectives. Elsewhere, Bush was able to construct a sophisticated international posture. Russia was pinned back, while the option of a future alignment against China was always kept on the table. In Europe, the usefulness of allies was evaluated (the conclusion being that states like France and Germany lack utility, while Eastern European countries will matter more): Franco-German irrelevance was demonstrated when Bush simply ignored their whining; their bid to balance American power failed dismally; and both states went crawling back to America in 2005, in a far weaker position and no longer taken seriously in Washington.

In the Pacific, meanwhile, a strategic alignment was created with India, relations with Japan were markedly improved (and Tokyo was partially coaxed out of its pacifist box), and a cautious dual policy of engagement and containment was established with China. Washington has good relations with all the key states (and, crucially, better than they have with each other) as Bush sought to position America equidistant in the region. In future contingencies the US will have great discretion in deciding when, and if, to get involved. America therefore has maximum flexibility in the Pacific, the key great power region of the twenty-first century; unheralded for now, this quiet manoeuvring is likely to be Bush's principal legacy. Elsewhere, other, genuinely intractable problems (Iran, North Korea) were addressed but nothing conceded; verbal

exhortations were frequently made to allies to 'do something' (another way of testing how useful partners are); and, overall, American interests were successfully defended and, indeed, advanced.

Importantly, the Bush strategy has been followed by Obama. Just recently, Obama labelled the American-Indian partnership the most important of the century; he has pursued Bush's policy in Iraq and Afghanistan; Al-Qaeda is blunted by funding, military aid, and drone strikes wherever it rears its head (Yemen); allies are evaluated; missile defence in Eastern Europe is still going ahead; France and Germany are still ignored; and the detentions policy that outraged the Left under Bush has been expanded!

With a record like this, one has to wonder what on earth the actual basis is for critical assessments of the Bush presidency. Presumably, by daring to be from Texas, Bush hacked off the snobbish Left; and by proving to be more sophisticated in foreign affairs than the know-it-all university professors and ex-State Department officials, he humiliated the 'realists'. George W. Bush displayed clarity of strategic vision with sophistication in tactical and practical matters – while being unruffled and resolutely unwilling to panic when everyone else did.