

George W. Bush: the End of an Era

By Langdon Morris

January 20, 2005 could mark the last inauguration of a Republican president for a long time to come. Let me explain why.

Political movements gain power as they reflect popular sentiment; once in power they dominate if they remain close to the spirit of the times. But then, sooner or later, they flounder when their attachment to ideology severs their contact with reality. When this happens distortions emerge and unintended consequences abound. In this way, even the most successful political movements sooner or later sow the seeds of their own destruction; in short, they mistake their own ideological rhetoric for reality, and reality quickly comes back to haunt them.

A few examples make the point. Laissez-faire dominated the early decades of the 20th century, but its ideological excesses led directly to the Crash of 1929 and the Depression. Trapped in a dysfunctional ideology, Herbert Hoover failed to respond to the challenge and opened the door to Roosevelt's New Deal.

From 1932 through 1968 Roosevelt, and then Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson reshaped American society in fundamental ways, but their run ended abruptly when Lyndon Johnson fell into the ideological quagmire of Vietnam and the New Deal exhausted itself in Johnson's Great Society.

Since Johnson, Republican ideology has gained power, but the Republicans who now dominate American politics are showing all the signs of overwhelming - and misplaced - confidence in their own ideology, and Bush is now poised to pursue a more ideologically aggressive conservative agenda than any Republican of the last 80 years. But the desire to reshape government along ideological lines makes it quite likely that the Republicans will self-destruct in ideological excess, and that Bush's second term will thus mark the end of an era.

This prospect is one of the few things that Democrats have to look forward to over the next four years; helping the backfire to happen is one of the few viable strategies that Democrats can pursue in the hope of ever regaining power.

Already the cracks in the Republican ideological dyke are showing in the many policy failures that constitute the main policy threads of Bush's first term. His ideologically-driven tax cuts led to massive budget deficits; the invasion of Iraq has trapped the US in an unpopular foreign war whose cost in lives and dollars is rapidly escalating with no end in sight. Having followed ideology and ignored the will of the world's nations, the US has sunk to a new low point in the eyes of the world. Following a pro-business ideology Bush has rolled back decades of environmental protections; weakened Medicare under

the guise of reform; and presided over a steady decline in social services; all the while in denial about the threat of global warming even as the cost of natural disasters is ballooning worldwide to previously unimaginable proportions.

All of these actions carry serious consequences that are now emerging more clearly, and the next four years are looking like more of the same. Here are three examples among many: Although Allan Greenspan has been warning for two years that continuing deficits poses a direct threat to the American economy, Bush promises still more tax cuts. Having emasculated Medicare, Bush is now threatening to “reform” Social Security, and it’s clear that he will try to dismantle what could legitimately be considered the most successful government program of all time because it doesn’t fit his ideology. At the CIA, Bush’s new director is now purging anyone “not supporting the president’s policies,” a code phrase meaning that those not aligned with the ideology of Bush’s American empire, the very people who predicted the quagmire in Iraq and who foresaw the resulting civil war, are being tossed out just when their judgment and expertise could help prevent another debacle.

Thus, Bush adheres to an ideology that is more and more divorced from reality even as its results are progressively worse for America and the world. And gradually the public will awaken from the sway of Bush’s charisma and look more critically at his actions. What they will see is ideological excess, myriad unintended consequences causing a failed presidency, and perhaps the decline of the entire conservative movement. George W. Bush, having sown the seeds of his own downfall, marks the end of an era.

Langdon Morris is author of *The War for America: Morality, Ideology, and the Big Lies of American Politics* (www.warforamerica.com).