

Test by Fire

THE EVOLVING AMERICAN PRESIDENCY SERIES

Series Foreword:

The American Presidency touches virtually every aspect of American and world politics. And the presidency has become, for better or worse, the vital center of the American and global political systems. The Framers of the American government would be dismayed at such a result. As invented at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention in 1787, the Presidency was to have been a part of a government with shared and overlapping powers, embedded within a separation-of-powers system. If there was a vital center, it was the Congress; the Presidency was to be a part, but by no means, the centerpiece of that system.

Over time, the presidency has evolved and grown in power, expectations, responsibilities, and authority. Wars, crises, depressions, industrialization, all served to add to the power of the presidency. And as the United States grew into a world power, presidential power also grew. As the United States became the world's leading superpower, the presidency rose in prominence and power, not only in the U.S., but on the world stage.

It is the clash between the presidency as invented and the presidency as it has developed that inspired this series. And it is the importance and power of the modern American presidency that makes understanding the office so vital. Like it or not, the American Presidency stands at the vortex of power both within the United States and across the globe.

This Palgrave series recognizes that the Presidency is and has been an evolving institution, going from the original constitutional design as a Chief Clerk, to today where the president is the center of the American political constellation. This has caused several key dilemmas in our political system, not the least of which is that presidents face high expectations with limited constitutional resources. This causes presidents to find extra-constitutional means of governing. Thus, presidents must find ways to bridge the expectations/power gap while operating within the confines of a separation-of-powers system designed to limit presidential authority. How presidents resolve these challenges and paradoxes is the central issue in modern governance. It is also the central theme of this book series.

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Test by Fire: The War Presidency of George W. Bush

by Robert Swansbrough

Test by Fire

*The War Presidency of
George W. Bush*

Robert Swansbrough

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TEST BY FIRE

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I dedicate this book to the American men and women who serve or have served in Afghanistan and Iraq since the 9/11 attacks. As a former Navy officer from the Vietnam era, I respectfully salute their courage, sacrifice, and patriotism.

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Foreword

Robert Swansbrough, a scholar of the presidency, has always shown great breadth in his understanding of America's premier political office. I have followed his career as a political scientist and university administrator for almost forty years. What has struck me most about his work, other than the consistently clear style of writing, is his holistic approach to research. He is remarkably sensitive to the interplay among the three levels of analysis—international, domestic, and individual—that preoccupies students of the presidency.

All too often studies of various presidents and their administrations limit their examination to how well the United States coped with foreign crises. Or, more commonly, scholars will probe the successes and failures of presidents at home, as they face the inevitable buffeting of domestic politics that push against administrations from all sides. Sometimes, too, although this is more rare, political scientists will attempt to tell us something about the president as an individual, delving into the idiosyncrasies of personalities in the White House and the question of psychological affects on public policy. Professor Swansbrough knows that none of these influences can be overlooked, and that they interact in myriad ways to shape the contours of an administration. His forte lies in tracing these often-subtle relationships.

He brings other strengths to his study of the George W. Bush administration. He understands the importance of theory and elsewhere has crafted sophisticated, lucid models of presidential behavior; but most of his writing, and certainly this book, concentrates on dissecting the interwoven stories of history and politics that are the warp and woof of every administration. Swansbrough's work reminds us that history without a sense of politics, or politics without a sense of history, are exercises in taxidermy. Only when the two are brought together does the subject come alive. Swansbrough's ability to explore the second Bush administration on all three levels of analysis, while bringing to the story the richly textured history and politics of this era, make this book an extraordinarily good read as well as a mother lode of scholarly insight into the rocky ride George W. Bush has given the nation.

The definitive analysis of this administration will not come for another 50 years, when key classified documents and sealed private papers are finally released to the public. In the meantime, Swansbrough's study provides us with as reliable and perceptive a look into these recent years as one is apt to find. Certainly his choice of a topic could hardly be more riveting or significant. While President Bush's tenure started off in a mundane fashion, with the president headed down the road to obscurity and a legacy comparable to that of Millard Fillmore or Franklin Pierce, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have guaranteed this presidency will not be soon forgotten.

Especially controversial has been the manner in which the Bush administration responded to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. At first stunned by the boldness and the horror of the attacks, the administration soon had in its crosshairs the group responsible: al Qaeda, along with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that had provided a haven for the terrorists. Thanks largely to a contingency plan against Al Qaeda that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had been working on since 1998, the administration was able to retaliate rapidly, forcefully, and successfully against the Taliban regime, overthrowing its grip on Afghanistan through a coordinated combination of CIA covert action, Special Forces operations, B-52 bombing, and able assistance from anti-Taliban factions inside Afghanistan known as the Northern Alliance (residing in the northern region of the nation).

The administration failed, however, to close the noose on the Al Qaeda leadership, which managed to flee to mountainous redoubts along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Otherwise, the military and intelligence operations were a textbook success, with the Taliban government smashed and Al Qaeda in disarray. The CIA has never had a finer hour since its establishment in 1947; and the skill with which U.S. spies and soldiers worked together was striking. Then, as Professor Swansbrough chronicles so well in this book, things began to fall apart.

The most fateful decision made by the Bush administration after this initial success against the 9/11 terrorists was to shift the nation's attention and resources away from finishing the job. Instead, the White House turned toward another adversary: Saddam Hussein of Iraq. How could this have happened? Much of this book offers answers to this complicated question, which is bound up in the views of so-called neoconservatives toward the world and above all their goal of enhancing the safety of Israel. The neoconservatives held influential positions in the administration, such as Paul Wolfowitz, the second-in-command at the Department of Defense. They managed to persuade the president and Vice President Dick Cheney to adopt a radical new approach toward the conduct of American foreign policy: coercive democracy. It was not enough to declare one's support for democratic regimes around the world, in the spirit of Woodrow Wilson, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan; one had to use the unmatched military might of the United States to overthrow dictators around the globe and install in their place democratic regimes—starting with Saddam.

Moreover, as advisors in the administration underscored for the president, the remaining Al Qaeda and Taliban targets in Afghanistan were ghost-like, hiding in deep caves that made B-52 bombing raids irrelevant. In contrast, Iraq offered a target-rich environment. More important still, Saddam was arguably the major long-term threat to Israel in the Middle East. Further, he had attempted to assassinate the president's mother and father, Barbara and George H.W. Bush, when they toured Kuwait after the 1991 war against Iraq. This was personal. Also, conveniently, the CIA and most of its companion intelligence agencies feared that Saddam might have developed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Here was a plausible public reason for going to war, even if the intelligence was more ambiguous than the White House wanted to believe (or the director of Central Intelligence communicated to the president), and even though the supposed presence of WMDs could have been determined within a few months, had not the administration rushed to war for its other purposes.

So off to battle the nation went in March of 2003, joined by what the president referred to as a “coalition of the willing,” but which included only the United Kingdom and a rag-tag group of half-hearted supporters (several of whom were bought off by promises of increased U.S. foreign aid). Accompanying the war in Iraq and the wider global struggle against Islamic extremists came a series of overreactions: the torture of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad; their imprisonment without counsel or trial at Guantánamo, secret CIA prisons in Albania (among other places), “extraordinary renditions” that had the CIA kidnapping terrorist suspects in Europe and flying them to brutal prisons in Cairo and elsewhere. As news of these activities seeped out to the world, the standing of the United States plummeted—even in places such as Australia and Scandinavia, where America had been held in high regard.

The myths surrounding the war were profoundly misleading and fed by the administration’s spin-doctors. The war would be paid for with Iraqi oil money. American troops would be greeted as liberators and handed flowers by the Iraqis, just like U.S. soldiers along the Champs-Élysées in 1945. A small and nimble U.S. force could get the job done, topple Saddam, and come home, easy as pie. The initial invasion did go well, but then Iraq quickly turned into another Vietnam: costly in blood and treasure, with no victory in sight, a quagmire. President Bush, egged on by his vice president and the neocons, had rolled the dice down the table in the name of democracy and, by 2007, History had called out “snake eyes.” President Bush, no longer a Fillmore or Pierce, had taken on the attributes of a Lyndon Johnson—a failed presidency stained irreparably by a failed war.

This is the story that lies before the reader in this book, told better here than anywhere else—a story of tragic dimensions that will continue to haunt the United States for decades. It is a story that holds important lessons for those who study it closely. May these lessons be learned and remembered by all of us who seek a United States that is, as John Quincy Adams so wisely advised in his Inaugural Address, “the friend of all the liberties in the world, [but] the guardian of only her own.”

LOCH K. JOHNSON
Author of *Seven Sins of American
Foreign Policy*