



DECISION POINTS

George W. Bush

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About the Author:

George W. Bush served as the 43rd president of the United States of America. Since leaving office, he has led the George W. Bush Presidential Center at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas where has been advancing initiatives in the fields of education reform, global health, economic growth, and human freedom, with a special emphasis on promoting social entrepreneurship and creating opportunities for women around the world.

General Overview:

The hardest yet most important part of the job of serving as president of the United States is to make the critical decisions which arise on your watch. Invariably, these decisions are all tough judgement calls with very strong arguments on both sides. How you weigh the options and the principles you apply in making those decisions ultimately shapes how your presidency will be viewed in history.

Presidential decisions are tough because they impact on people not only in the United States but across the globe. Sometimes you get them right, sometimes you get them wrong but the only thing that's guaranteed is there are no do-overs. The only way to survive is to do what you believe is right according to the principles and duties you uphold and then to accept the consequences come what may.

"Decades from now, I hope people will view me as a president who recognized the central challenge of our time and kept my vow to keep the country safe; who used America's influence to advance freedom. And I hope they will conclude that I upheld the honor and dignity of the office I was so privileged to hold. Whatever the verdict of my presidency, I'm comfortable with the fact I won't be around to hear it. That's a decision point only history will reach."

* **Please Note:** This political book summary does *not* offer judgment or opinion on the book's contents. The ideas, viewpoints and arguments are presented just as the book's *author* had intended.

Quitting

“Quitting drinking was one of the toughest decisions I have ever made. Without it, none of the others that follow would have been possible. Yet without the experiences of my first forty years, quitting drinking would not have been possible either. So much of my character, so many of my convictions, took shape during those first four decades. My journey included challenges, struggles, and failures. It is testimony to the strength of love, the power of faith, and the truth that people can change. On top of that, it was one interesting ride.”

George W. Bush was the first son born to George and Barbara Bush, and many of his earliest childhood experiences were comparable to those of many others born in the Baby Boomer generation. He attended Yale, joined the Texas Air National Guard as a trainee pilot while his father ran unsuccessfully for Senate before being appointed by President Nixon as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. George eventually ended up going to Harvard Business School to earn an MBA, and then went into the oil business in Midland, Texas in 1975. He started out as a land man searching out titles before starting a small oil exploration company of his own in 1979. That company eventually merged with another and became part of Harken Energy, a publicly traded company. George met and married Laura Welch on November 5, 1977 and they had twin girls born to them on the day before Thanksgiving 1981.

Running

“After months of soul-searching and countless hours weighing the pros and cons, I was headed to Iowa, site of the first caucus in the 2000 presidential election. I had thought through some big questions. Was I willing to forgo my anonymity forever? Was it right to subject my family to the scrutiny of a national campaign? Could I handle the embarrassment of defeat with the whole country watching? Was I really up to the job? I believed I knew the answers, but there was no way to be sure. I did know I felt a calling to run. I was concerned about the future of the country, and I had a clear vision where I wanted to lead it. I wanted to cut taxes, raise standards in public schools, reform Social Security and Medicare, rally faith-based charities, and lift the sights of the American people by encouraging a new era of personal responsibility.”

George W. Bush got a taste for politics by helping out in his father’s campaigns in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. He ran for Congress in Texas but was unsuccessful. Meanwhile, his business career went in a different direction when a former business partner told him the owner of the Texas Rangers baseball team was considering selling. George partnered with Richard Rainwater, a successful Fort Worth investor, who agreed to raise half the money to buy the franchise if George would raise the other half. This was done and the new ownership group took over the Texas Rangers on Opening Day 1989.

When his father lost the presidential election to Bill Clinton in 1992, George got the political bug again. He decided to run for governor of Texas in 1994 against a very popular incumbent, Ann Richards. Getting the nomination was easy because everyone assumed Richards was unbeatable, but Bush ran a campaign based on four policy issues: education, juvenile justice, welfare reform and tort reform. When the results came in on election night, George Bush was successful in what was considered a stunning upset. He immediately got to work making reforms in those areas and was reelected as governor of Texas in 1998.

During his second term as governor, George started thinking about making a run at the presidency of the United States. By this time, George Bush had teamed up with Karl Rove who he fondly termed his “political mad scientist” because of his encyclopedic background knowledge. After about eighteen months of introspection and discussion, George authorized Karl Rove to start preparing the necessary paperwork and recruiting a network of people to raise money. He had decided to run for president of the United States.

Personnel

“As a small business owner, baseball executive, governor, and front-row observer of Dad’s White House, I learned the importance of properly structuring and staffing an organization. The people you choose to surround you determines the quality of advice you receive and the way your goals are implemented. Over eight years as president, my personnel decisions raised some of the most complex and sensitive questions that reached the Oval Office: how to assemble a cohesive team, when to reshuffle an organization, how to manage disputes, how to distinguish among qualified candidates, and how to deliver bad news to good people.”

A new president’s first major personnel decision comes months before taking office when he must decide on a vice-presidential running mate. This selection in and of itself provides a window into the candidate’s decision-making style and signals likely priorities for the country should he or she win election. George Bush asked Dick Cheney to run the vetting process for vice-presidential candidates and Cheney eventually came back with a list of nine candidates. When Cheney presented his report, George looked him in the eye and said, “Dick, you are the perfect running mate.” Cheney finally agreed and the ticket was set.

The 2000 election for president of the United States against Bill Gore turned out to be one of the most controversial, drawn out and dramatic elections in living memory. Ultimately, of the 105 million ballots cast nationwide, it all came down to several hundred votes which were cast in Florida. It took five weeks of uncertainty, legal maneuvers and even an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court before the election was decided. In the end, the Supreme Court ruled Florida’s chaotic and inconsistent recount procedure was flawed and there was no fair way to recount the votes in a timely manner for Florida to participate in the Electoral College. The election night results would stand which mean George Bush would become the forty-third president of the United States to succeed Bill Clinton. The delay also meant there was just 38 days for the new Bush administration to be formed.

Stem Cells

“I laid out a process for making decisions. I would clarify my guiding principles, listen to the experts on all sides of the debate, reach a tentative conclusion, and run it past knowledgeable people. After finalizing a decision, I would explain it to the American people. Finally, I would set up a process to ensure that my policy was implemented.”

One of the early difficult decisions facing the new Bush administration was whether or not the federal government had a responsibility to fund embryonic stem cell medical research. The moral question at hand was whether or not a frozen embryo should be given the status of a human life and if so, what responsibilities did the government have to protect it. President Bush did all the background reading first which spanned the spectrum of viewpoints which existed about stem cells within the scientific community. He met with many bioethicists and many with strong views on the moral territory being navigated here including Pope John Paul II. The key issue came down to whether the potential benefits of saving lives outweighs the cost of destroying embryos which one day had the potential to become children.

After intensively debating the pros and cons inside the administration for quite some time, President Bush announced in August 2001 the government would fund research solely for existing stem cell lines but would not fund the further destruction of embryos for medical research. A President’s Bioethics Council was also created to provide ongoing counsel on ethical issues like this which might arise in the future. When the decision was announced, reaction came in quickly. Many politicians and activists considered the new policy to be reasonable and balanced but some criticism of the decision was very personal in nature – which has become an unfortunate characteristic of recent American political debate. There is an increasingly toxic atmosphere in American politics which must discourage good people from running for office in the future.

Day of Fire

“When I woke up on September 12, America was a different place. Commercial aircraft were grounded. Armed vehicles patrolled the streets of Washington. A wing of the Pentagon had been reduced to rubble. The New York Stock Exchange was closed. New York’s Twin Towers were gone. The focus of my presidency, which I had expected to be domestic policy, was now war. The transformation showed how quickly fate can shift, and how sometimes the most demanding tasks a president faces are unexpected. The psyche of the nation had been shaken. Families stocked up on gas masks and bottled water. Some fled cities for the countryside, fearing that downtown buildings could be targets. Others who worked in skyscrapers couldn’t bring themselves to go back to work. Many refused to board a plane for weeks or months. It seemed almost certain there would be another attack.

There is no textbook on how to steady a nation rattled by a faceless enemy. I set three goals for the days immediately following the attacks. First, keep the terrorists from striking again. Second, make clear to the country and the world that we had embarked on a new kind of war. Third, help the affected areas recover and make sure the terrorists did not succeed in shutting down our economy or dividing our society. I went to the Oval Office on September 12 at my usual time, around 7:00 a.m.. The first order of the day was to return phone calls from the many world leaders who had offered their sympathy. The coalition of the willing in the war against terror was forming, and – for the time being – everyone wanted to join.”

War Footing

Three days after 9/11, Congress passed a war resolution which authorized the president to use all necessary and appropriate force against terrorists. In response, the Bush administration created a new federal department which unified homeland security efforts and decision-making, and marshaled the USA PATRIOT Act through Congress. The PATRIOT Act would subsequently be used to break up potential terror cells in New York, Oregon, Virginia and Florida. A controversial Terrorist Surveillance Program was initiated along with authorization being granted for the CIA to use enhanced interrogation techniques, including waterboarding. Plans were uncovered that al Qaeda was well advanced in preparing to launch a biological weapons attack against the United States using anthrax and the people involved were arrested. There was also considerable public debate over how suspected terrorists could be detained and ultimately placed before military tribunals. In all, the response to the terrorist attacks was always played out in the glare of complete media scrutiny which is a hallmark and defining characteristic of the U.S. Constitution. Whether this was helpful or not is beside the point – it is an absolute necessity. It also proves most times a president doesn’t choose his battles – they come to him or her.

“As I listened to my last CIA briefing the morning before President Obama’s inauguration, I reflected on all that had happened since 9/11: the red alerts and the false alarms, the botulinum toxin we thought would kill us, and the plots we had disrupted. Years had passed, but the threat had not. The terrorists had struck Bali, Jakarta, Riyadh, Istanbul, Madrid, London, Amman, and Mumbai. My morning intelligence reports made clear that they were determined to attack America again. From the beginning, I knew the public reaction to my decisions would be colored by whether there was another attack. If none happened, whatever I did would probably look like an overreaction. If we were attacked again, people would demand to know why I hadn’t done more. That is the nature of the presidency. Perceptions are shaped by the clarity of hindsight. In the moment of decision, you don’t have that advantage. On 9/11, I vowed that I would do what it took to protect America, within the Constitution and laws of our nation. History can debate the decisions I made, the policies I chose, and the tools I left behind. But there can be no debate about one fact: After the nightmare of September 11, America went seven and a half years without another successful terrorist attack on our soil. If I had to summarize my most meaningful accomplishment as president in one sentence, that would be it.”

Afghanistan

“Sending Americans to war is the most profound decision a president can make. Sunday, September 16, was a day of reflection. By that afternoon, I had reached one of the defining decision points in my presidency: We would fight the war on terror on the offensive, and the first battleground would be Afghanistan.”

In the lead up to making this decision, President Bush met numerous times with military planners who laid out the three options which were available:

1. Cruise missile strikes on known al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan.
2. Combine cruise missile strikes with manned bomber attacks to hit more targets.
3. Employ cruise missiles, bombers and troops on the ground in Afghanistan.

After consulting with the National Security Council, the decision was made to go with option 3 even though it would be costly and dangerous. The reason was Operation Enduring Freedom would remove the Taliban and liberate the people of Afghanistan from a restrictive and oppressive regime at the same time. It would also allow the Afghan people to build a free and democratic society on their own terms and conditions. The war in Afghanistan would later come to be viewed as an expensive exercise in nation building but for President Bush, it was a price that had to be paid. The war in Afghanistan still continues as of 2010 as active military operations against the Taliban continue and the elected government struggles to get full control of the country to build much badly needed infrastructure but the signs are there the Afghanistan war is yielding fruit and heading in the right direction. The Taliban will succeed only if America abandons the country.

Iraq

“As I record these thoughts more than seven years after American troops liberated Iraq, I strongly believe that removing Saddam from power was the right decision. For all the difficulties that followed, America is safer without a homicidal dictator pursuing WMD and supporting terror at the heart of the Middle East. The region is more hopeful with a young democracy setting an example for others to follow. And the Iraqi people are better off with a government that answers to them instead of torturing them and murdering them. The war also led to consequences we did not intend. Over the years, I’ve spent a great deal of time thinking about what went wrong in Iraq and why. I have concluded that we made two errors that account for many of the setbacks we faced. The first is that we did not respond more quickly or aggressively when the security situation started to deteriorate after Saddam’s regime fell. In the ten months following the invasion, we cut troop levels from 192,000 to 109,000. Many of the remaining troops focused on training the Iraqi army and police, not protecting the Iraqi people. We worried we would create resentment by looking like occupiers. The other error was the intelligence failure on Iraq’s WMD. Almost a decade later, it is hard to describe how widespread an assumption it was that Saddam had WMD. Supporters of the war believed it; opponents of the war believed it; even members of Saddam’s own regime believed it. We all knew that intelligence is never 100 percent certain; that’s the nature of the business. But I believed that the intelligence on Iraq’s WMD was solid.”

“The nature of history is that we know the consequences only of the action we took. But inaction would have had consequences, too. Imagine what the world would look like today with Saddam Hussein still ruling Iraq. He would still be threatening his neighbors, sponsoring terror, and piling bodies into mass graves. The rising price of oil would have left Saddam awash in wealth. The pressure on our friends in the region especially Israel, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – would have been intense. And the American people would be much less secure today. Instead, as a result of our actions in Iraq, one of America’s most committed and dangerous enemies stopped threatening us forever.”

Leading

“One of the lessons I took from Roosevelt and Reagan was to lead the public, not chase the opinion polls. I decided to push for sweeping reforms, not tinker with the status quo. As I told my advisers, ‘I didn’t take this job to play small ball.’ I am proud to have signed No Child Left Behind and Medicare modernization, two pieces of legislation that improved life for our citizens and showed that conservative principles of accountability and market-based competition are effective ways to get results. I am pleased that the faith-based initiative continues. I am confident social security and immigration reform will be a reality some day. No matter what, I am satisfied that we led on the issues that mattered most – and never played small ball.”

Faith-based initiatives were important to President Bush and he paved the way for around \$20 billion a year in federal funding to flow to more than five thousand grassroots charities and community organizations. President Bush was also proud of No Child Left Behind legislation which set clear educational goals and then held schools accountable for progress. He helped reform and modernize Medicare to allow it to cover prescription drugs through private insurance plans which could compete for people’s business. He left office regretting the political climate wasn’t right to tackle immigration and the modernization of Social Security during his second term but confident these looming big problems will be tackled soon. Sometimes it takes more than one president and occasionally even more than a generation to accomplish major legislative changes such as will be required on these issues.

Katrina

“I faced a lot of criticism as president. I didn’t like hearing people claim I had lied about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction or cut taxes to benefit the rich. But the suggestion that I was a racist because of the response to Katrina represented an all-time low. I told Laura at the time that it was the worst moment of my presidency. I feel the same way today.”

In September 2005, New Orleans was hit simultaneously with three different disasters – a storm generated by hurricane Katrina which wiped out miles of the Gulf Coast, a flood caused by breaches in the levees around New Orleans and an outbreak of violence and lawlessness in the city. The combined effect of these three disasters was a tragedy which illustrated the helplessness of man against the fury of nature. The federal government started mobilizing resources in response even before Katrina struck when it became clear what a devastating hurricane this would be but by law, the federal government could not take over the response effort unless and until the governor of the state of Louisiana requested it – which was something Governor Kathleen Blanco refused to do. It was feasible to deploy active duty troops to assist under the antiquated Insurrection Act but if President Bush had invoked this act, it would have been viewed as a male Republican president usurping the authority of a female Democratic governor by declaring an insurrection in a largely African American city located in the Deep South where there had been centuries of pent-up tension over civil rights.

After spending days trying to persuade the governor to formally allow the federal government to take over the Katrina response effort, President Bush sent in seven thousand active-duty troops without law enforcement powers under the command of General Russ Honoré. He was soon designated as the “Rajin’ Cajun” by the press because of his no-nonsense approach and the fact he had Creole ancestors. Over the next few days, order was restored, search-and-rescue operations were completed, and people were evacuated from the devastated city. It took eighteen harrowing days to get the problems sorted – which was far longer than was expected of the world’s most powerful nation. The lessons learned in New Orleans ultimately filtered through the federal government’s contingency planning as to how it would respond to natural disasters in the future. For all the devastation Katrina caused, it ended up improving the federal government’s ability to support state and local governments as they respond to major disasters.

Lazarus Effect

“Before 9/11, I had considered alleviating disease and poverty a humanitarian mission. After the attacks, it became clear to me that this was more than a mission of conscience. Our national security was tied directly to human suffering. Societies mired in poverty and disease foster hopelessness. And hopelessness leaves people ripe for recruitment by terrorists and extremists. By confronting suffering in places like Africa, America would strengthen its security and collective soul.”

When the Bush administration took office, America was spending \$500 million a year to fight AIDS globally – more than any other nation but a paltry amount taking into account the scale of the problem. Within 18 months, that amount doubled as the Mother and Child HIV Prevention Initiative was announced and funded. That led to PEPFAR which is a large-scale program focused on AIDS treatment, prevention and care. PEPFAR was funded with \$15 billion over the course of five years and demonstrated quite definitively the depth of the U.S. commitment to fight AIDS, especially in Africa. This was also supplemented by a \$1.2 billion program to try and eradicate malaria in fifteen countries by 50 percent over a five year period. The United States also launched a new approach to economic development termed the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA). To be eligible for MCA funds, countries had to show they could govern free of corruption, pursue market-based economic policies and be willing to invest in the health and education of their people. In the first six years of operation, the MCA invested \$6.7 billion of seed capital in projects in thirty-five partner countries to achieve some noteworthy things.

Surge

“Because the United States liberated Iraq and then refused to abandon it, the people of that country have a chance to be free. Having come thus far, I hope America will continue to support Iraq’s young democracy. If Iraqis request a continued troop presence, we should provide it. A free and peaceful Iraq is in our vital strategic interest. It can be a valuable ally in the heart of the Middle East, a source of stability in the region, and a beacon of hope to political reformers in its neighborhood and around the world. Like the democracies we helped build in Germany, Japan and South Korea, a free Iraq will make us safer for generations to come.”

The Iraqi war and subsequent efforts to build a democracy there were very unpopular within the United States. Yet when put in the context of history’s lessons of the transition of Germany, Japan and South Korea from war-devastated economies to stable democracies, it is clear that many years are required and a U.S. troop presence is sometimes a visible and necessary element in the process. In Iraq, this transition is even more difficult due to underlying long-running ethnic and sectarian tensions.

Although it initially looked like reasonable political progress was being made in Iraq with elections being held for a national assembly to draft a constitution followed by the election of a national legislature, sectarian violence exploded in 2006. Despite the fact increasing rather than decreasing the number of U.S. troops in Iraq would be unpopular with the 2006 mid-term elections looming, the decision was made to do precisely that. The decision to stay the course and deploy tens of thousands more troops – a surge – was extraordinarily difficult and was only made after intensive analysis of the situation on the ground and the best way to move forward but it was the right thing to do on a number of different levels. To abandon the struggle now because of some transitional or teething challenges in the development of a new democracy in Iraq would be foolhardy. Even worse, those families who had members make the ultimate sacrifice that our nation might achieve its objectives in Iraq would be frustrated we did not stay the course and finish the job we started. To give up now would be to forget the debt we owe those who have given so much in the cause of liberty.

Freedom Agenda

“After 9/11, I developed a strategy to protect the country that came to be known as the Bush Doctrine: First, make no distinction between the terrorists and the nations that harbor them – and hold both to account. Second, take the fight to the enemy overseas before they can attack us again here at home. Third, confront threats before they fully materialize. And fourth, advance liberty and hope as an alternative to the enemy’s ideology of repression and fear. The freedom agenda, as I called the fourth prong, was both idealistic and realistic. It was idealistic in that freedom is a universal gift from Almighty God. It was realistic because freedom is the most practical way to protect our country in the long run. As I said in my Second Inaugural Address, ‘America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one.’”

The freedom agenda in particular was castigated as a way for America to impose its values on other nations but the point is freedom cannot be forced on anyone, it must be chosen. Despite the fact the number of democracies worldwide had grown from 20 at the end of World War II to more than 120 by the time of President Bush’s second term, the usual hotspots were still there. The Israelis and the Palestinians were still locked in their ideological struggle, with Hamaz and then the Hezbollah party coming to power for the Palestinians. The rising tide of democracy in other parts of the Middle East caused aggressive reactions from the extremists. The regime in Iran caused all sorts of worries over their progress towards developing nuclear arms, not to mention the fact Iran is one of the world’s leading state sponsors of terrorists. The intentions of North Korea are also of great concern, and the freedom agenda is a sensitive subject with the Chinese.

Financial Crisis

“The nature of the presidency is that sometimes you don’t choose which challenges come to your desk. You do decide how to respond. In the final days of my administration, I gathered my economic advisers for a last briefing in the Oval Office. I had assembled a strong, experienced team that was capable of adapting to the unexpected and making sound recommendations. We had done what we believed was necessary, knowing it would not always be popular. For some in our country, the Troubled Asset Relief program or TARP had become a four-letter word. I believe it helped spare the American people from an economic disaster of historic proportions. The government made clear it would not let the economy fail, and the Second Great Depression that Ben Bernanke warned about did not happen.

One of the questions I’m asked about most often is how to avoid another financial crisis. My first answer is that I’m not sure we’re out of the woods on this one yet. Financial institutions around the world are still unwinding their leverage, and governments are saddled with too much debt. To fully recover, the federal government must improve its long-term fiscal position by reducing spending, addressing the unfunded liabilities in Social Security and Medicare, and creating the conditions for the private sector – especially small business – to generate new jobs. At the same time, we must be careful not to overcorrect. Overregulation slows investment, stifles innovation, and discourages entrepreneurship. The government should unwind its involvement in the banking, auto and insurance sectors.

Above all, our country must maintain our faith in free markets, free enterprise, and free trade. Free markets have made America a land of opportunity and, over time, helped raise the standard of living for successive generations. Abroad, free markets have transformed struggling nations into economic powers and lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Democratic capitalism, while imperfect and in need of rational oversight, is by far the most successful economic model ever devised.”