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Julian E. Zelizer (ed.). *The Presidency of George W. Bush: A First Historical Assessment*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010. 386pp.

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As his recently released memoir *Decision Points* has confirmed, George W. Bush has never placed high value on introspection. Famously, when asked by the journalist Bob Woodward how he thought history would judge the war in Iraq, Bush replied: "History, we don't know. We'll all be dead." For a leader who has become both a punchline and an epithet, and whose administration is generally acknowledged as disastrous in popular and academic circles, the 43rd president seems remarkably untroubled by posterity's verdict.

This excellent book is unlikely to console those hoping for a sudden outbreak of revisionism. It takes as its unifying question, "what were the challenges that conservatives faced, now that they had become the governing establishment?" (7). Scholars of twentieth-century conservatism have so far largely concerned themselves with explaining the mobilisation of the New Right and paid less attention to the obstacles faced by conservatives in power. As Julian Zelizer notes, the Bush administration is of particular historical value in this respect because after 2001 American conservatives effectively comprised the political establishment, with the Presidency and Congress in Republican hands and even the Supreme Court tilted in favour of conservative ideals.

The result exposes the inherent contradictions of modern American conservatism. An ideology grounded in virulent anti-statism collided with the realisation that the institutions of big government were surprisingly useful in fulfilling its aims. As Zelizer describes, conservatives have abandoned their reservations about an over-mighty executive and embraced presidential power as a vital tool to advance conservative ideals. The acknowledgement of such developments indicates "the more complex and less adversarial relationship" conservatives have had with the modern

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state (37). Mary L. Dudziak extends this story to the legal strategies of the Bush presidency, which used the law as "a sword and a shield" to advance conservative aims while protecting executive autonomy.

Though the cultivation of executive power (and the tension this created between the ambitious, even utopian, Bush and his suspicious anti-government base) necessarily serves as the major theme of this book, its scope is commendably broad and surely establishes the parameters of future debates on the Bush years. On the whole, there are few successes to proclaim here. James T. Patterson caustically surveys Bush's bulwarking of supply-side economic dogma, before a swift volte-face in the face of the financial crash of 2008. Timothy Naftali explores Bush's "decidedly mixed" (86) record in the "war on terror," while Fredrik Logevall offers a truly unnerving critique of the events leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, condemning both the dissimulations of the Bush administration and the failure of Congress and huge sections of the national media to provide an effective brake. Michael Kazin rounds off the collection with a cautious assessment of the damage inflicted by Bush's presidency on the conservative movement.

Those looking for a cathartic screed detailing the many calamities of the Bush years will be disappointed, however. One of the most sympathetic essays in the book comes from Gary Gerstle, who convincingly depicts Bush as the champion of a new multicultural Republican majority, doomed in part by the GOP's nativist turn as the president's approval ratings tumbled. Similarly, Kevin M. Kruse presents Bush the "compassionate conservative" who ran in 2000 promising "a kinder, gentler face for religious conservatism" (229). The president's failed faith-based initiatives and more successful campaign against AIDS in Africa testify that such rhetoric went beyond crude political positioning.

The major strength of this book is the anchoring of the Bush administration in a longer narrative of American conservative ascendancy. Thus, Meg Jacobs describes an energy policy with roots at least as far back as the Nixon administration, which owes as much to the growing influence of the Sunbelt in the Republican Party as to the one-time Texas oilman in the Oval Office. Likewise, Nelson Lichtenstein makes Sunbelt conservatism a key feature of his contribution, a discussion of the administration's trade, labour, healthcare and retirement policies which he characterises as being aligned with the interests of "the southern, thoroughly Republican" retail giant, Wal-Mart (171). David Greenberg's essay traces the history

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of the conservative assault on expertise as the foundation of government policy, overturning one of the enduring legacies of the Progressive movement, which climaxed in one Bush aide's superficially bizarre comment about their adversaries in the "reality-based community" (199).

George W. Bush's reputation remains low among professional historians, who frequently rank the 43rd president alongside such luminaries as James Buchanan and Millard Fillmore. After reading this book from cover to cover it is difficult not to concur. However, the measured judgements of these essays are a welcome corrective for a presidency, and a president, that too often slide toward lurid caricature in public debate. Laying bare the appalling flaws and overlooked virtues of the Bush presidency, this judicious and informative collection is an impressive opening salvo in what is likely to be a long war.