



The American Presidency: George H W Bush Professor Sir Vernon Bogdanor FBA CBE

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This may be the year of Darwin, but many have said that the evolution of the American presidency from Roosevelt to the younger Bush is sufficient to refute the theories of Darwin! It is true that perhaps the calibre of the more recent Presidents has not been those of the giants with whom I began, such as Roosevelt and Eisenhower. Today, I am talking about George H W Bush, the father of George W Bush, often known as Bush 41 to distinguish him from Bush 43 and, unlike his son, he was an explicitly failed President in the sense that he was repudiated after one term - he was a one term President.

It is often said that the American presidential race is dominated by money, and that no one but a billionaire can hope to win, but most of the Presidents I have been discussing come from very humble circumstances: all of Truman, Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and then Clinton came from unusually poor circumstances and encountered very great difficulties. The only two exceptions, until till now, have been Roosevelt and Kennedy, but Bush was a third exception as he was a very rich man indeed; a genuine billionaire.

He was the son of a wealthy Connecticut Senator and his family included a former President of the United States; he came from the American aristocracy, or as near to it as you can get in the United States. He had a very good war record: he was the youngest pilot in the Navy and he won a medal for completing a mission in a burning plane before bailing out into the sea - he had a very brave war record. After the war, he went to Texas, where he made a large fortune in oil, by methods which perhaps should not be scrutinised too closely. But, regardless, he became a very rich man.

Like Franklin Roosevelt, he was, as I say, a member of the American aristocracy, but there are not many other similarities with Roosevelt. For a start, he lacked Roosevelt's electoral pulling power. Roosevelt almost always won elections; the only election he ever lost was the Vice-Presidential ticket in 1920. He won twice as Governor of New York, in 1928 and 1930, and four times as President - that is a record unlikely ever to be surpassed. In contrast, Bush had a habit of losing elections.

He first stood for the Senate, for Texas, in 1964, and that was a bad year for the Republicans because Goldwater was the presidential candidate against Lyndon Johnson, and Bush was heavily defeated in the Democratic landslide. Then, he won a seat in the House of Representatives, the lower House of Congress, in 1966, and served two terms there till 1970, when he stood for the Senate, but he was beaten again.

Then, a stroke of luck occurred for him: he was chosen by Nixon as Ambassador to the United Nations. The reason that he was chosen by Nixon is symptomatic of Bush's career: Nixon chose him as a loyalist who would not cause any trouble. Nixon's previous Ambassadors to the UN had been people who thought it was a powerful Cabinet post and a policymaking post, and Nixon did not like that. Nixon did not have much time for the United Nations and wanted someone who would not exert much strong personality, and so he chose George Bush.

After that, he became Chairman of the Republican National Committee, which was a difficult job during the years of Watergate. Bush kept his head down during that time, insisting in public that the President was innocent, and was he seemingly quiet in the inner circles of Republican politics. The only real intervention he made was at the last Cabinet meeting of Nixon's Government, when he apparently insisted that it was time to go, which was a general view by then.

Nixon's successor, Gerald Ford, appointed Bush as a representative to China in 1974. He spent a year in China, and then he was given yet another powerful post, Director of the CIA, the intelligence agency. His other major post before coming President was the Vice-Presidential position under Ronald Reagan.

All these features illustrate something very important about Bush: that he was a politician by appointment and not by election; that the key positions he had were positions he had been appointed to by other Presidents, he had not won by election for himself. There is a great contrast there with Presidents like Roosevelt and Reagan, and the nearest similarities perhaps are other Presidents who succeeded without being elected - Truman and Ford. However, Truman and Ford had been elected: Truman had been elected as a very effective Senator, and Ford was the Leader of the Congressional Republicans, the House Leader of the Republican Party, so they had both been in electoral politics and proved successful in them. Bush had not been successful in electoral politics; he had been successful in appointed politics.

In the various jobs that he had held, which were very important sounding jobs, he seems to have achieved little, other than keeping the ship afloat. So that is the first feature that I think Bush's background career shows about him.

The second feature is that his expertise was primarily in the area of foreign policy. He had probably had more widespread experience of foreign policy than any post-War President, except perhaps Eisenhower. He had met most of the world leaders, he had held the key positions, he understood Intelligence, and he knew a great deal about foreign policy. But he had not any expertise in domestic politics, and particularly in economic policy, and that was to prove his Achilles heel - or at least one of them, because there were many! This was a particular problem for him because he faced Democratic majorities in Congress; the opposition was in power in Congress during all the time that he was President. But having said that his expertise was in foreign policy, even in foreign policy, his political career had been based on taking direction from other people. He had been an executant and an implementer, rather than a political leader, as he had been under the authority of various Republican Presidents - Nixon, Ford, and then as Vice-President under Ronald Reagan. He had never been required to chart his own course and steer America in a particular direction; he had never been required, in other words, to show what you might call leadership qualities. Indeed, he once referred to leadership as 'the vision thing', which is perhaps typical of his tortured syntax. He had not ever been required to define what he stood for and it was not ever very clear.

At first, this did not seem to matter, because although he won the Republican nomination in 1988, at the end of Reagan's two terms, it seemed that he would be heavily defeated. The Democratic Convention chose a Governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis, as their candidate, and since the Democrats already had a majority in Congress, it looked as if the Republican era was coming to an end. Bush tried to counteract this but he was inarticulate and rather awkward in public speeches. A part of this was that he tried, rather unsuccessfully, to pretend he was just an ordinary chap from Texas. His imitations of folk ways from Texas led the current Governor of Texas, who is a Democrat, Ann Richards, saying that he had been 'born with a silver foot in his mouth'!

But eventually, Bush's advisors got their act together and said they could win the election by painting Dukakis, Bush's opponent, as a left wing liberal. It is true the Democrats seemed also to have run out of steam and to have lost the sense of direction which they had at the time of Lyndon Johnson. They had had just one President since then, Carter, who could not restore that sense of direction and he was really a

failed President. The Democrats seemed to be fracturing into various pressure groups - ethnic minorities, labour unions, students, other minorities - with no one to really hold them together until perhaps Clinton succeeded in doing so. Perhaps a similar problem afflicted the Labour Party in Britain at this time, and perhaps it was not till Tony Blair came along with New Labour that the left had a sense of direction; perhaps it was a common problem. But what Bush did was to paint Dukakis as an unrepresentative liberal, under the influence of various unrepresentative pressure groups, and out of touch with the mainstream of American people. He did that particularly on the issue of crime.

In Massachusetts, Dukakis' Republican predecessor had instituted a policy by which prisoners were given periods out of prison for brief stays in the outside world before they came back, and that was a policy that many states had, including California in Ronald Reagan's time and federal prisons, but only Massachusetts had it for prisoners on life sentences. One prisoner, Willie Horton, an Afro-American, who had been imprisoned, given a life sentence, for murder and rape, was released on furlough under this programme and proceeded to commit another murder. Dukakis discontinued the programme in 1988, shortly after that, but Bush attacked that, in fairly unpleasant terms. It was attacked on television and Bush tried to distance himself from it, but I think not very successfully, and called the 'revolving door prison policy' by which prisoners went in one door and out the other to commit more murders, and there was also a racial undertone to it, which was extremely unpleasant. Sadly, it was not unique, because Clinton was later to do exactly the same.

He proceeded to attack Dukakis in those terms, and he also made light of the fact that Dukakis, unlike him, had no military or naval experience, and Bush said of Dukakis that 'He thinks a naval exercise is something you find in Jane Fonda's exercise books.' Dukakis, sadly, tried to make up for that by having himself filmed driving a tank, but he was rather diminutive and it looked rather absurd, and indeed, he was not a very colourful candidate. The satirist Mort Sahl said Dukakis was 'the only colourless Greek in America'.

The campaign was uninspiring because neither of the parties seemed to have a clear sense of direction on what to do, and the turnout was very low - just 54% - but Bush won, fairly comfortably in the end, by 53% to 47% of the vote. This was a larger percentage vote than Truman, Kennedy, Nixon, or Reagan in 1980, in his first election, and roughly similar to Obama. But Bush failed to bring Republicans into Congress with him; there were no coattails and there was a larger Democratic majority in both Houses. Indeed, someone said about Bush, 'Far from bringing coattails, he was elected in a bikini.' This created a great problem for Bush, because it meant that it was not easy for him to take new initiatives. He was not in the position that Reagan had been in 1981 or Barack Obama is now or Roosevelt in 1933, of having a clear mandate for change, new policies and so on. Therefore, even if Bush had had clear policies, which I think he did not, he was facing an opposition majority in Congress.

Even so, he could have identified a number of key initiatives, as both Reagan and Roosevelt had done, and worked on them. He could have indeed appealed to the country over the heads of Congress, which was what Reagan and Roosevelt did when they faced opposition from Congressmen - they appealed to the people and said, 'These are important programmes, put pressure on your Congressmen, and let's get them through - this is what the presidency is about.' Both Roosevelt and Reagan faced, as it were, windows of opportunity at the beginning, and I think Obama does as well, and took risks to get through what might seem radical policies. An important example of this is the 100 Days, of Roosevelt, which very topical now and a number of books just been published on that, for obvious reasons, to do with the deep depression America was in. Here Reagan sought to cut federal spending and taxes by unprecedented amounts, and campaigned in the country to put pressure on Congressmen.

Bush was a relatively passive President, insofar as domestic affairs were concerned, for the first two years. But in 1989, when he was elected, it seemed as if this did not matter, because he saw himself, and was seen by most of the electorate, as a consolidator and not an innovator. Indeed, having succeeded Ronald Reagan, under whom he had been Vice-President, he could not say 'what America now needs is radical change'; he was an inheritor of a set of policies and commitments, which he had to stick to. So his aim was

to consolidate the status quo, if you like; to consolidate the Reagan revolution. You may say the Presidential election of 1988 had been, in a sense, a referendum on the status quo, and people had said, 'We like what Reagan's done and we want that preserved.'

I think John Major was in a similar position in Britain after Margaret Thatcher; that Margaret Thatcher put forward radical measures, so John Major's aim was to preserve them and to ensure the Labour Party did not upset them; he was there as a consolidator on, if you like, a withdrawing tide. This was a very difficult position to be in because you could not easily disown what your predecessor was doing and so you cannot really have radical change.

Bush struck a very different tone from 'heroic' Presidents like Reagan and Roosevelt in his Inaugural Address. He almost deliberately lowered the temperature and lowered expectations, and his rhetoric was of such poor quality compared with Roosevelt and Reagan that you could not but draw the contrast. He said: 'Some see leadership as high drama and the sound of trumpets calling, but I see history as a book with many pages: the new breeze blows, a page turns, the story unfolds.' It is unclear precisely what that means, but he went on to say that, 'We need compromise.' He said, 'We have had dissent; we need harmony. We've had a chorus of discordant voices. To my friends, and yes, I do mean friends, in the loyal opposition, and yes, I do mean loyal, I put out my hand. I'm putting out my hand to you, Mr Speaker. I am putting out my hand to you, Mr Majority Leader. For this is the thing: this is the age of the offered hand.' Well, 'the age of the offered hand' does not really, I think, compare with 'the New Deal' or 'the Great Society' or any of these other phrases, and Bush did fall down a bit on rhetoric.

Shortly after he was President, he was asked how he saw the future of NATO, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and he said: 'Listen, I can't see ten days out, and I don't think you can. How can I predict what the conditions are going to be?' That was not what people wanted to hear from an American President.

However, after his Inaugural Address, Time magazine called him 'Mr Consensus' and they said that, 'After eight years of the Reagan revolution, Bush's modest pragmatism seems more welcome than unwavering single-mindedness.' They said it was not the Changing of the Guard but the 'guarding of the change'.

'What really counts,' Bush said, 'are the day-to-day things. If you do well in the short run, the long run will take care of itself.' As I have mentioned before in my previous lectures on the American Presidents, I think this sort of thinking involves a radical misunderstanding of the nature of the American presidency. Bush, like two previous failed Presidents, Hoover and Carter, saw the President as the nation's top administrator or problem-solver; that he was there to deal with problems as they came up, solve them, and then get on with the next one. It seems to me that that is not what the presidency is about; it seems to me the purpose of the presidency is to offer a sense of direction to the American people, to offer leadership, to chart where they are to go. The great American Presidents have done that; they have not necessarily been very good administrators - Roosevelt certainly was not and nor was Ronald Reagan - but they have been able to bring the American people in a certain direction. But Bush was a reactive President; not an active President, but a reactive one.

You may say, in foreign policy, perhaps that was not a wholly bad thing, because he faced something that really had hardly been foreseen, or certainly not foreseen would happen so rapidly, namely, the collapse of communism in Europe. You may say any strategy that you had adopted in 1988 would have become rapidly outdated in 1989; that the events were happening so quickly, it was very difficult to develop a strategy that could actually deal with them, and therefore a simply pragmatic reaction to events was quite sensible. Bush again said - perhaps he was satirising himself, but I think it unlikely - that his aim was 'to do nothing, but do it well'. It is fair to say that he made no big mistakes in foreign policy, and perhaps that is greater praise than it sounds, because many other American Presidents have made big mistakes in foreign policy, but you may argue a more adventurous foreign policy at the time of the collapse of communism

could have led to all sorts of mistakes in adapting to that. Bush, as it were, kept the ship afloat and made no real errors. He was a cautious and moderate conservative, and again, you can compare him with John Major. You may say perhaps countries need that after a period of radical upheaval.

Bush then was a pragmatic conservative who sought consensus in both foreign and domestic policy. It was clearer in foreign policy what that meant, with the collapse of communism, but what did it mean in domestic policy? What were his policies on the domestic front?

He faced the rise of a group of radical Republicans led by the future Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, who said that the Reagan revolution, rather than being stabilised, should be intensified and we should go on with it. This was rather like what John Major faced, on the right, with the pressure from Euro sceptics and others who said the Thatcherite revolution should not be put on hold but pursued much more radically. The Gingrich approach was to continue with the Ronald Reagan policy of tax cuts, even though the federal deficit was growing all the time, and also to introduce a new policy in an area that Ronald Reagan, despite his rhetoric, had kept clear of, the social agenda, and in particular to restrict abortion rights in America. Bush gave a very uncertain response to all that. It was never precisely clear what his policies were and what he wanted Congress to do.

But nevertheless, he did have some domestic successes, and in particular in the field of education, where I think he has not been perhaps wholly recognised. He did initiate an important shift in American attitudes to education. I think you could argue that no President since Lyndon Johnson has done more to dramatise the problems of American education.

At the time that Bush became President, there were great worries about educational standards in America. There were similar criticisms to those heard in Britain; that children were not learning to read and write quickly enough, schools were letting children down, America was failing to compete with other industrial countries, was on a road to becoming technologically backward, that test scores were poorer than they should be, and so on. In 1989 Bush called an Education Summit of the various Governors, because one has to remember that education in America, until this time, was primarily a state responsibility, not a responsibility of the federal Government. It is as if in Britain education was almost wholly a local responsibility. So it is a similar trend in both countries: the response to educational problems has been to centralise the education system, for better or worse.

Bush did not want to take over educational responsibilities himself, but he pressed the states to adopt more rigorous standards in education, and he tried to encourage the introduction of vouchers to encourage parents to be able to choose schools for themselves and choose, if they wished, to go to private schools. He tried to make it easier for people on smaller incomes to choose private schools for their children.

The Democratic opposition to this in Congress said that the real problem, as Johnson had said, was more federal aid to education. They said that aid was the correct answer, particularly to the poor and ethnic minorities in the form of compensatory education programmes. Bush said no, that studies were showing that these compensatory programmes had not achieved their effects; that a lot of money had been put in the inner cities and ethnic minority schools, but test scores had not in fact risen. Bush encouraged a shift, rather similar to that that was occurring in Britain at the time, from concentrating upon educational inputs - how much money was being spent on the service - to a concentration on educational outputs - what the actual outcomes and results were. In the end this led, under Bush's successors, particularly under his son, Bush 43, to a much greater federal oversight over the state - over the education system in the states. It is a paradox really, that you have also got the conservatives in Britain also moving towards a greater state role in education, some people said excessive role. In Britain, at about the same time, in 1988, we had the Education Reform Act, under Kenneth Baker, which centralised education, and it was said - I don't know whether it is true or not - that the Minister of Education in the dying Soviet Union congratulated Kenneth Baker on the degree of centralisation that he had achieved. But conservatives in America were also was

moving towards it; they wanted to get a hold on a system which they said was not achieving the right results for particularly underprivileged American people, and they said it was not a question of the money being put in - a lot of money had been put in - it was something else, and they were trying to deal with that. So that is one area where I think Bush did have some success in altering opinion.

Other measures were promoted by the Democratic majority in Congress and supported by Bush. An act was passed called the Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibited discrimination against the disabled and was hailed as an emancipation proclamation for the disabled, and that occurred under the Bush regime. Then there was the Clean Air Act, which gave stronger enforcement of national air quality standards. So those were the areas where he was, on the whole, successful.

His great failure was on economic policy, and that, perhaps, was not wholly his fault; it was perhaps partly the legacy that Ronald Reagan had left him.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan had campaigned on the plank of lowering taxes, despite the federal deficit. The Republican argument, the supply side argument, was, if you lower taxes, the rich and the better-off will work harder and therefore there will be both less tax evasion and tax avoidance, but also a larger federal revenue because more will be produced. Therefore, in the end, revenue will increase, paradoxically, if you lower the rate of taxes, because a high rate of marginal taxation was acting, so the Reaganites said, as a disincentive to work and opening up businesses and all the rest of it.

Bush attacked this as what he called 'voodoo economics', but Reagan, who won the election against him in 1980, proceeded to carry out that programme. The deficit was even worse than you might have predicted, because Reagan cut taxes, and Congress agreed to that, but when Reagan wanted to cut the programmes, Congress refused, so the expenditure was maintained, the public expenditure rose during Ronald Reagan's presidency, but the tax cuts were there, so the federal deficit was increasing.

In 1985, the Republicans in Congress passed an act called the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act, requiring the Federal Government to balance the budget by 1993, and producing targets for reducing the deficit. This put Bush in a bit of a hole, because he fought the election by promising now increase in taxes. People said in the election, 'If you're President, you'll have to deal with this mess that Ronald Reagan's left you, and you'll have to raise taxes.' Bush said, 'No, I'm a Republican. I can't raise taxes; it's not what we believe in.' In an unfortunate statement, he said, 'Read my lips - no new taxes!'

At first, nothing really seemed to happen, and despite the recession in America, tax revenue was falling and the deficit was rising, and by 1991, it was huge - it was \$318 billion, the largest in American history - and was going to rise still further as the costs of the Gulf War, which I am going to talk about in a moment, came home. Public expenditure was 25% of the national product, the largest in American history, an interesting and ironic comment on the Reagan years, because Reagan had been a conservative, said America should rely less on the state, should cut these programmes, look after themselves and all the rest of it. He had not succeeded in doing that because Congress would not let him. So, by logic, the only two things to do were: either a drastic cutting of federal programmes, which Congress would never agree to because they had to face their electors as well; or Bush would have to break his promise and raise taxes, and, as you can probably guess, the latter was what occurred, and it was to doom his presidency.

Meanwhile, he had to deal with various issues of foreign policy. The first one, as I have said, was the collapse of communism in Europe. One American Secretary of State in the 1940s, Dean Acheson, Secretary of State under Truman, was to write a book called 'Present at the Creation'. If Bush had wanted to, he could have written a book called 'Present at the Collapse', because communism collapsed very suddenly, it imploded from inside, and although some people had predicted it might eventually collapse, I do not think people appreciated how very rapidly it would collapse, really within the space of a year; in

1989, communism collapsed in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, the Baltic States, the dissident playwright, Vaclav Havel, was elected President of Czechoslovakia, and these countries all declared their independence from the Soviet Union. The Berlin Wall was pulled down, and German unification within NATO occurred, and that was a result of the Germans and Americans working together. Despite the doubts of France and Britain, they convinced the dying Soviet Union to accept that the reunification of Germany and the resultant necessity of joining the Western alliance system. Margaret Thatcher had a lot of doubts about it, and so did Mitterrand, but this was area where perhaps Bush did exert some pressure and achieved a result.

Bush said this was the end of an era and the Soviet Union had gone, and he proclaimed a new world order, but it was never very clear what this new world order amounted to, and, in my opinion, this is the problem the world still faces; that in the Cold War, there were very rough and ready rules as to what states could do and could not do, but in the post-Cold War era, there are no such rules. The younger Bush tried to lay down, unilaterally, some such rules when he became President. Most people think it was fairly disastrous, but at least he tried to do so. But we still suffer from the fact that Americans in particular, who are bound to have a leadership role, did not consider how the new world order would be governed, when the challenge was not from a kind of monolithic communist empire, but different sorts of challenges - perhaps from the clash of civilisations, perhaps from terrorism, but new kinds of challenges were coming - which, you may say, the job of good government is to foresee and say something about. But Bush did not; he just said there was a new world order, but it was not clear what that actually amounted to.

Very soon that order faced its first challenge, which it is fair to say Bush on the whole surmounted successfully, when in August 1990, the dictator of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, invaded Kuwait. Bush's first reaction, oddly enough, was quite passive. He said, 'We're not considering intervention,' but then he was visited by Margaret Thatcher who apparently said to him, 'This is no time to go wobbly, George!' It is not clear whether it was as a result of that or not, but Bush then became a very strong hawk, against the wishes of his Cabinet. His Secretary of State, Baker, was very much in favour of a compromise with Iraq. The Chief of the Military, Colin Powell, later to become Secretary of State under the younger Bush, said he favoured no more than sanctions, but Bush insisted there must be military victory, and he told Congress, 'Saddam Hussein will fall'. He and his Administration showed great diplomatic skill in securing a UN coalition of 34 states to give Saddam Hussein an ultimatum that either he withdraw from Kuwait by January 15th 1991 or a UN coalition would attack him, not, as under the younger Bush, America and other forces, but a UN coalition.

Interestingly enough, opinion in America was very strongly divided. After the war, everybody said it was a great success, which implied everyone was in favour of it, just as after the second Iraq War everybody said it was a great failure and that no one was in favour of it. In both cases, that is not the case. The Senate voted just 52 to 47 for war, and the House 250 to 183. The opponents of the war said there should be sanctions instead.

Interestingly enough, John Kerry, who was Democrat candidate in 2004, voted against the first Gulf War and, despite what you may think, he voted for the second war, the Iraq War, although he stood against Bush in 2004. Afterwards, he said he had voted for the war before he had voted against it, but he had actually voted for the 2003 war but against the first war.

If one took polls in America a week before the war, just 47% of the American people approved of force. In a Los Angeles Times poll, in November 1990, 60% said they feared a second Vietnam. Robert McNamara, who had been Secretary of Defense under Kennedy and Johnson, said there would be 30,000 American casualties. In fact, the number of American casualties were under 2,000, and during the four days of ground fighting, more people died in the United States due to crime, than were killed in the war in Iraq, though it was a very one-sided war. 150,000 Iraqis were killed during the war, from bombing or ground operations, but it was, from the American point of view, a spectacular success. It was not a second Vietnam, and most military commentators would say that it was a triumph of incisive planning and almost

faultless execution, and when it was over, Bush stood at 91% in the polls, and no American President has ever stood higher. One commentator in Timemagazine has said: 'Never before has an American President stood so grandly astride this capacious world as George Bush does these days. Historians scratched their heads and looked for something comparable - there was nothing.'

When people sobered up a bit, they began to ask themselves questions about the Gulf War, and the first question they asked was: should America not have continued and got rid of Saddam Hussein? 56% in the polls at the end of the war said yes, and 36% said no. Bush's argument for not continuing was that he was the leader of a UN coalition, and it was not for America to decide, and the coalition's remit was simply to get Iraq out of Kuwait, and in particular, the coalition was supported by Arab and Muslim states who would not be in favour of removing a regime that America happened not to like - they might feel perhaps that it might turn on them one day, but they certainly would not, did not favour that. They were going to get Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, but no more than that.

Also, Bush was not willing to risk further American casualties, nor, it is fair to say, further Iraqi casualties, which would have been horrendous. He said, 'It would be a turkey shoot,' and he was not prepared to do that. He also I think hoped that the defeat would, of itself, help to topple Hussein, and it seems to me that signs were given to various groups in Iraq - the Kurds and Shias in particular - that Hussein could be overthrown. There were revolts against him, but they were put down pretty ferociously by Saddam Hussein, with the West watching on. John Major introduced the idea of safe havens for the Kurdish minority, but that was after really quite severe massacre.

And then the most serious question that people began to ask was: could the war have been avoided? There is some evidence that it could have been, because the American Ambassador to Kuwait appears to have told Saddam Hussein shortly before the invasion, 'We have no opinion on Arab/Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait,' whereas an aide to Secretary of State Baker said, 'We do not have any defence treaties with Kuwait and there are no special defence or security commitments to Kuwait.' The day before Iraq invaded, the Assistant American Secretary of State, John Kelly, said, 'We have no defence treaty arrangements with any of the countries. We have historically avoided taking a position on border disputes.' You may say that if America had given an absolutely clear signal that she would not tolerate an invasion of Kuwait, that Saddam Hussein would not have done it; you may say Saddam Hussein was given signals that America would not in fact intervene, and that if different signals had been given, the war could have been avoided. I think that that is a fairly reasonable position to take.

It is also fair to say that Ronald Reagan and his Administration had supported Iraq in the war against Iran. Henry Kissinger had said of that war, 'It's a pity they both can't lose!' but Reagan and the Americans took the view that it was better to have a secular dictatorship than Iran, and Reagan had taken Iraq off the list of terrorist nations during that war and had restored diplomatic relations with Iraq. The Americans had done nothing when Saddam Hussein, in 1988, had used chemical weapons against the Kurds; indeed, they had opposed economic sanctions and had continued to export dual use technology to Iraq, as indeed had Britain, though it is fair to say not as much as some of the states which were later to criticise them, like France and Russia, which really did give Saddam Hussein a great deal of equipment and moved into markets that were vacated by the British and Americans.

But nevertheless, despite all that, as I say, Bush, after the end of the Gulf War, in January 1991, had 91% support, the highest ever for an American President, and he said, 'By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!' It would be 18 months to the presidential election, and one would have thought that he could not lose it. I remember telling an American graduate student of mine that Bush was bound to win, and he said, 'No, no, he's going to lose the election.' I thought he was utterly wrong but he was sure enough to take a £5 bet on it. When it came time for me to pay up he explained his forecast by the belief that, 'Americans don't vote on foreign policy, they vote on the economy,' or, as Clinton, in Clinton's war room of the election, said, 'It's the economy, stupid!'

Anyway, at the time that seemed not so. In 1991, he was one of Timemagazine's men of the year, though Time magazine did point out that he had a commanding vision of a new world order, though I am not clear that was true, but also that he showed little vision for his own country and that was a problem. The first problem, he had to get to grips with tax rises, and in the summer of 1990, he had already started increasing marginal tax rates for those in top income brackets, and he imposed new taxes on petrol and cigarettes, and that was against everything Ronald Reagan and his supply siders had taught. The New York Post had a headline, 'Read my lips - I lied!'

At first, he could not get agreement with Congress on this, because the Republicans opposed tax increases, and the Democrats opposed his proposed reductions in expenditures. So, for a while, Bush had to go without a budget, and it meant that he closed various national monuments: the Statute of Liberty, the Washington Monument, the Smithsonian Museum, even the National Zoo was shut until further notice. Tourists locked out of the Zoo went to the public galleries of Congress instead, but said they could not really tell the difference!

In the end, Bush got an agreement with the Democrats on the budget. Most Republicans voted against his Budget Enforcement Act, and it did not stop the rise in the federal deficit, because Government spending, despite the budget, continued to increase, so Democrats would not vote for deep cuts. This intensified the split in the Republican Party and the strength of the Republican right, led by Gingrich. In a sense, the Republican right were helped by the collapse of communism, because anti-communism had given them a cause they could all unite around, but now that was gone and they had to find other causes, and Gingrich, in particular, found this issue.

Bush found himself with an opponent from the right in the presidential primaries - very unusual for a sitting President - and his opponent was Pat Buchanan, who had been Director of Communications for Ronald Reagan and was a talk show host. He not only opposed Bush's economic policies, but also opposed his social policies and called for, in particular, a greater emphasis on religion, the religious right, and a stronger opposition to abortion. In the New Hampshire Primary, he showed how divided the Democrats were by winning 35% of the vote to Bush's 56%. It was very unusual for a sitting President to face such opposition.

Even worse, the recession seemed to intensify while Bush was in office. It led to nearly 8% unemployed in 1991. Bush had the bad luck to meet a very skilful opponent, Bill Clinton, known by admirers and opponents alike as Slick Willie, and Clinton, when there were television debates between Bush and him, whereas Bush would make comments saying he was very upset about unemployment and would deal with them and so on, Clinton would go down to the audience, to the person who had asked the question, embrace them and say, 'Well, I feel your pain, you know, and I see what's happening to you?'

Clinton moved the Democrats away from the older traditions, where they identified simply with high taxation and high spending. He showed he was not soft on crime; indeed, he did something which I think was worse than what Bush had done with the revolving doors; he explicitly went back to Texas to approve the execution of a severely mentally retarded black prisoner during the election campaign, to show that he was tough on crime. But his main attack on Bush was on the economy because Bush had the worst economic record since the Great Depression: the Gulf War was forgotten and Clinton said to Bush, 'The Economy, stupid!'

Bush had a further bit of bad luck: there was a third candidate in the election, called Ross Perot, a billionaire businessman from Texas, who took more votes from Bush than the Democrats, and who said, 'Eliminate the deficit.'

Bush seemed out of touch, and when the Republican Convention met, he allowed it to get out of hand, and it was dominated, wholly, by the religious right, which stressed family values, the restoration of prayer in

the public schools, and the denunciation of abortion. Pat Buchanan said: 'There's a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. This war is for the soul of America.' While it strengthened support for people who were already strongly militant Republicans, it alienated the floating voters who were prepared to vote perhaps for economically conservative positions but not for socially conservative positions, because it seemed in that period that Americans were economically conservative but socially liberal, and in particular, Bush lost a great deal of the female vote. Clinton, perhaps remarkably given his record, scored disproportionately well in voting amongst women.

When the election came, Clinton won 43% of the vote, Bush 37% of the vote, and Perot 19%. This result for Perot was very good for a third candidate, and most of it, about 70% of his votes, were from Bush's 1988 supporters. Bush held onto the Western conservative states, but he lost the key urban states in the North-East and in the far West, particularly California, which were, as I have said, socially liberal and would not vote for a socially conservative candidate.

I think Bush therefore ended as a one-term President for the same reasons as Hoover and Carter, that he failed to understand the nature of the modern presidency and the requirements that it imposes for presidential leadership that is offering a sense of direction to the American people. It is fair to say that neither of his two successors, in my opinion, had much greater success in that area either: neither Clinton, whose two terms were under the shadow of impeachment, as the younger Bush, whose terms were under the shadow of the problems caused by the Iraq War and perhaps the recession after that. You may be asking the question, 'Can Barack Obama do it?' but fortunately, the historian is not called upon to be a soothsayer.

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