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THEY SAID IT

This is hardly the first time that concerns about George W. Bush's base have been raised. Throughout the summer of 2002, Republicans grumbled (about the farm bill, about steel tariffs, etc.) and the media speculated that this would damage the GOP cause in the midterm elections. "Someone," the *Wall Street Journal* editors wailed in June of that year, "might want to tell Karl Rove that a Senate victory will be pyrrhic if President Bush manages to alienate the GOP base, voter turnout falls as a result and Republicans lose the House in the process." Well, it didn't happen.

You see, for the most part, the "alienation of the base" in 2002 was much as it is now, an "elite" phenomenon. Yes, some conservatives are unhappy with Bush, but those individuals are generally those of us in Washington (or Mt. Jackson, as the case may be). And while there is always the possibility that Bush will go too far and actually do something to alienate rank-and-file Republicans, that seems unlikely, at least before the election next year. Unlike his father, this George Bush cut taxes, twice, in fact. And rank-and-file Republicans will remember this more than anything else he has done or will do on the domestic policy front.

--Stephen R. Soukup and Mark L. Melcher, "Go George," The Political Forum, December 8, 2003.

BUSH and the BASE.

Over the past couple of weeks, the disagreement among Republicans over the immigration question has morphed into what many political pundits have come to describe as a full-fledged rebellion against President Bush by his "conservative base." We would argue that this description is somewhat misleading, that it would be more accurate to say that the contention between the President and some voters in his conservative base has morphed into a full-fledged rebellion against the President by a number of conservative *elites*.

This is not to say that President Bush is not having any trouble with his base. But his fundamental problem begins and will end, either well or poorly, with the conservative elite, which not only continues to grow disillusioned, but which has ramped up its efforts to convince the rest of "the base" that it too should be unhappy with the President and the direction in which he has chosen to take the country on a handful of issues.

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Bush and the Base.

Erstwhile Bush stalwarts like Peggy Noonan, who actually quit her job to work for Republican candidates during the 2004 campaign, want us to believe that “the administration’s problem is not that the base lately doesn’t like it, but that the White House has decided it actually doesn’t like the base.” Jed Babbin, who worked for Bush’s father, thinks that “The love may have gone out of the marriage between conservatives and Mr. Bush.” And nearly everyone at *National Review*, once the epicenter of support for the wartime president, has soured on Bush and on his approach to immigration in particular, with the magazine’s editor, Rich Lowry, last week calling the President’s proposal to deploy National Guardsman to the border “Bush’s final, desperate descent into Clintonian sleight of hand.”

The questions that all of this raises are not insignificant. Why, one might wonder, are the very people who, seven years ago, pushed another Bush on a leery Republican Party now so upset that they can hardly see straight? How did a president who has largely governed as he said he would manage nonetheless to render those who once supported him most enthusiastically as unhappy and unhinged as anyone on the Angry Left? Is this really about immigration at all? And if it’s not, what can we expect for the remaining two-and-a-half years of the Bush presidency?

In our opinion, what is going on here is really very simple. The people who have the greatest stake in the political process – those who helped make George Bush president, who raised money for his campaigns, who backed his candidacy, who got behind him on the war and then made every effort to keep the public behind his as well – are demanding to be repaid for their loyalty and support. They took care of him, now it’s his turn to take care of them.

Of course, that is the way the system is supposed to work. We elect you because you share our values, and you proceed to let those very values guide you through the legislative and regulatory processes. That’s the name of the game.

It just happens, however, that in Bush’s case, the rules of that game are a little different. Not only is he in the unique position of not even having to consider the possibility of running for re-election – one of only five men in the nation’s history to have had that luxury – but unlike each of the four who came before him (Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton) Bush doesn’t have to worry about getting anyone else elected in 2008, since his vice president has rather adamantly refused even to entertain the idea of running at the head of the ticket.

For Bush, electoral politics simply don’t matter anymore. Not having to face voters again, his elite supporters believe that he can do just about whatever he wants (within limits), and they believe further that what he should want to do is advance the causes in which they believe most deeply. Understanding his need to remain electorally viable, conservatives held their noses and swallowed hard during the first term, but now that re-election is behind them, they want the spoils of victory and they want them now. And they can’t understand why the President isn’t delivering since they recognize no impediment to him doing so. Richard Viguerie, the author of the new book, *Conservatives Betrayed: How Big Government Republicans Hijacked the Conservative Cause*, summed it up thusly yesterday in a *Washington Post* piece:

We were told: Just wait till the second term. Then, the president, freed of concern over reelection and backed by a Republican Congress, would take off the gloves and fight for the conservative agenda. Just wait.

We’re still waiting.

Certainly, there’s nothing wrong with wanting “a conservative agenda.” Again, that’s the name of the game. But expecting President Bush to be able to wave his magic wand and make conservative things simply happen is naïve at best. And becoming apoplectic when it doesn’t work that way is not only crazy but counter-productive as well. Just because *electoral* political forces no longer affect Bush personally, that doesn’t mean that politics in general can be ignored.

The GOP majority in the House of Representatives (15 seats) is exceptionally narrow by historical standards. “Moderate” Republican senators are so numerous and so close to the Democrats on so many issues that Bill Frist, an exceptionally weak political leader to begin with, has been unable to do much of anything. Moreover, President Bush has to be concerned about the effect that his decisions may have on his party as a whole, given the terrible effect that loss of the majority would have on the war effort. He has to worry about the future state of the party and whether the Republican majority he’s built can survive his departure from the national stage in 2009. And, most importantly, he has to concern himself with a responsibility that no one else in the world shares, namely maintaining the safety, security, and well being of the United States.

Now, George Bush is not the first president to be in this situation. Indeed, his immediate predecessor’s presidency was, in many ways, remarkably similar. Like Bush, Clinton was a centrist who never tried to hide that fact on the campaign trail. And yet, the liberal elite expected him to govern from the left once in office and particularly once he had been returned to Washington for a second term. And like Bush, Clinton was a major disappointment to the ideological stalwarts who formed the base of his support. He supported and signed a cut in the capital gains tax; he signed a Republican-initiated welfare reform scheme; for crying out loud, he even proudly proclaimed the end of the era of big government.

But unlike Bush, Clinton’s elite supporters never turned on him, despite the fact that they disagreed with him on a host of issues. Ironically enough, the principal reason Clinton was never subject to outright rebellion on the part of his more ideological partisans was because his political opponents had been so successful and had, essentially, backed the whole lot of them into a corner. Clinton faced a hostile Congress; partisan affiliation was trending away from him and his party; and, most importantly, he was besieged by scandal. The liberals in the Democratic Party understood full well that they were about the only thing that kept Bill Clinton from tipping over completely, and he was the only thing that kept them

from doing the same. He needed them; they needed him; and they all stuck together, policy differences be damned.

A similar phenomenon occupied the attention of would-be partisan rebels during the Reagan administration. It’s easy to forget now, two decades later, that Reagan had some trouble with his base as well. But like Clinton and unlike Bush, Reagan spent much of his second term under serious, presidency-threatening fire from his domestic opponents, the Democrats in Congress and the media. Though a great many Republicans were unhappy with much of what went on during Reagan’s second term, for the most part they understood that they needed to stick with the president, for his sake, for the party’s sake, and for the country’s sake. And this staved off the kind of full-scale elite rebellion Bush is facing.

The fact of the matter is that the Bush presidency is historically unique. George W. Bush is the *only president in the history of the nation* to be constitutionally barred from running for another term while at the same time enjoying unified control of government and being generally free from major scandal, moonbat fantasies about imminent indictments in the farcical “Plamegate” notwithstanding.

The presumption therefore is that Bush can *and should* do whatever he – or more accurately his base – wants him to do. According to the restless elite, since there are neither personal nor practical political constraints on his actions, he should be able to push the agenda to which they feel they are entitled. But it’s not quite that easy. Bush can’t simply do whatever he wants and, in fact, he has had an exceptionally difficult time doing much of anything lately. Yet since he is not directly threatened by special prosecutors and grand juries, his supporters are unwilling to listen to what they believe to be excuses.

The bottom line here is that not only is Bush’s presidency historically unique, but the expectations placed on the President are as well. And his failure to meet those expectations reflects not the simple failure of leadership his disillusioned backers decry, but the unrealistic nature of those expectations.

What this means over the long run is that the contentiousness of the immigration debate is likely to be merely a portent of things to come. Even if Bush were to cave-in and yield to anti-immigration sentiment, throwing his weight fully behind the House version of immigration reform, those who are unhappy with him and his presidency would fail to be consoled. It's a long time between now and January 20, 2009, and there will be many more debates and many more contentious issues and many more opportunities for conservatives to lament what they consider to be the political fecklessness of the Bush administration. And in a number of those cases, the problem will not have anything whatsoever to do with Bush's failures, but with his erstwhile backers' failure even to contemplate the larger political realities.

Consider, for example, the looming battle over the renewal of the farm bill, which is scheduled to expire at the end of September next year. Recall that conservatives pilloried Bush for signing the last farm bill (The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002) because, they claimed, it was outrageously expensive and reestablished the type of subsidized agriculture regime that the Gingrich-led Congress had attempted to eliminate in the previous farm bill, the so-called Freedom to Farm Act (technically the Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act of 1996). When conservative opinion writers like George Will and Jonah Goldberg list the sins of the Bush administration, the 2002 farm bill is always chief among them.

Well, we hate to break it to these guys, but despite the fact that President Bush no longer has to face farmers voting in crucial Midwestern swing states, and despite the fact that his party will likely still control both houses of Congress when the farm bill comes up for renewal, and despite all of the criticism he has heard from friends and supporters over his signing of the last bill, he will almost certainly sign another bill next year that is remarkably similar. Indeed, as things stand right now, the Bush administration appears to favor simply extending the bill with a few minor changes, maintaining what Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns calls "the existing structure of farm programs."

Conservatives in the political and pundit classes will again hoot and holler about how Bush has forsaken the principles of smaller government, has once again fortified the underpinnings of "big government," and has given in to the interests of the large and powerful farm lobby. And in a narrow sense, they will be right. But in a broader sense, the issue is far more complicated.

Let us try to walk through this mess. When President Bush tabbed U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman to be his new director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) last month, among other things he was signaling his expectation that there would be no more progress made this year on the Doha Round of World Trade Organization negotiations. Though Portman's successor, Susan Schwab, is certainly capable, Portman (and before him now-deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick) has been Bush's point man on the Doha negotiations, and it is highly unlikely that Bush would have moved him into another position if he believed that real progress on the trade agenda was possible this year.

What does this have to do with next year's farm bill? Well, everything, actually. One of the administration's primary goals in the Doha negotiations is the elimination or at least the radical reduction in farm subsidies paid by governments in the developed world. The chief target of this provision, of course, is the EU, whose farmers are spoiled by government largesse to an extent about which even the most heavily subsidized American farmers can only dream. The United States has made credible offers to reduce its "Amber Box" (i.e. trade distorting) subsidies by as much as 60%, but has been rebuffed in its efforts by the Europeans, led by France, and the Japanese.

Some conservative farm-bill watchers believe that for the United States to renew its farm subsidies program after offering to cut them would demonstrate bad faith to other WTO members. Cato's Sallie James, for example, argued recently that "Going back on the proposal to cut allowable levels of support at this crucial stage of the round is entirely the wrong tactic for securing further improvements in market access, or

indeed any meaningful results from the Round.” But she and other critics who make such arguments are just flat wrong.

The idea here is not simply to cut American farm subsidy payments, thereby reducing government’s role in farming and achieving some of the ends originally advanced by the Freedom to Farm bill, but also to reduce the impediments to free trade that doomed Freedom to Farm in the first place. As much as conservatives hate these farm subsidies, right now they serve an incredibly useful purpose. They are a bargaining chip, and if the administration were to support legislation to reduce subsidies unilaterally, it would be throwing away whatever leverage it has to compel the Europeans to change their subsidy structure as well.

So while Bush’s conservative critics will scream and yell about spending and the size of government, the truth is that a failure to reach an agreement on the Doha Round will force the President’s hand. If he is to continue to pursue the goals of greater market access, greater global competition, and freer markets – all of which are laudable conservative/free market aims – then he will have to have leverage with which to bargain. And this, in turn, means a renewal of existing farm subsidies and the outcry from conservative elites that will accompany that renewal. Assuming the Doha negotiations do, indeed, fail (a reasonable but by no means certain assumption), Bush will almost certainly clash with conservatives again next year, and they will almost certainly once again call him a traitor to the cause, a betrayer of the Reagan legacy, and every other name in the book.

Now, our point here is not to defend the Bush administration or to suggest that the President is really pursuing a secret conservative agenda. He’s not. And

conservatives certainly have ample cause to be upset with much of what’s taken place over the last five-plus years.

But Bush’s conservative critics are, we think, getting a little carried away. When they claim, as many have during the current immigration debate, that the President has entirely abandoned conservative values and has thereby alienated an overwhelming majority of his base, they are exaggerating on both counts. For example, in resisting calls to deport 12 million illegals, Bush isn’t going soft, he’s merely acknowledging political, economic and social realities. And while the true rank-and file base is undoubtedly frustrated by both illegal immigration, they are not apoplectic as the more aggressive anti-immigrationists insist. As Dick Morris noted this morning, “even after a prime-time speech and a solid week of congressional action on the subject – immigration runs a distant third to pump prices as the major topic of conversation these days.”

Ever since President Bush was re-elected, we and others have been writing that the remainder of his term in office is going to be very long and very frustrating for his liberal opponents, frustrated as they are by their inability to do anything they want or to pass favored legislation. Given their expectations, it now appears more and more certain that the remainder of the Bush presidency is going to be very long and frustrating for some conservatives as well. And this, in turn, is going to mean that it will be long and frustrating for the rest of us. In other words, get used to reading about Bush and his “alienated” base.

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