

# *report* PUBLIC JUSTICE

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## EDITOR'S WATCH

### **Postmodern President: Second Edition**

Someone once described President Clinton as the first postmodern president. That description implied a kind of relativism, an empathy with all viewpoints, and a lack of political principles in Clinton's approach to the presidency. President George W. Bush, by contrast, is supposed to be the opposite: a counter-Clinton figure who says what he means and means what he says, who sticks to principle, and who does not flip-flop on policy commitments.

Yet this contrast is not quite accurate, even if Clinton and Bush do represent contrasting styles and stances. President Bush clearly displays important postmodern characteristics. The most important of those characteristics is his approach to decision making, which I would term "social constructivist." Reality, in other words, is what people make it to be. Social constructivists need not spend much time trying to decide whether their actions or the consequences of their actions square with principles or standards that transcend their good intentions. Reality is what we make of it. Society is a human construct, principles and all.

Is it possible that a country can harm itself by cutting taxes and going on a spending binge at the same time? Is there some law of fiscal balance and public stewardship that ought to be reckoned with here? For Bush, tax cuts are good; increased public spending on drug benefits is good; missile defense will be good if it can be achieved; increasing defense spending is good; all of this is good. The president declares it good; Congress should agree with him; and it will become so.

Might there be a problem in shifting into private accounts some of the Social Security taxes now paid by workers? Is there any standard or principle of justice for the common good that might be compromised by such an effort? Not, apparently, in Bush's mind. Private ownership is good, public bureaucracies are a drag; trillions more dollars of public expenditure to remake Social Security along market-competition lines is good. The president declares this to be good; Congress should agree; reality can be constructed to fulfill these aims.

Might it be wise for the president to rethink his policies on the war in Iraq, which has not yet stopped terrorism, not yet brought peace to Iraq, and antagonized many allies and potential enemies in the world? Is there some law of counter-productivity, or diminishing returns, or international justice that should be reckoned with here? As of this writing, Bush does not appear to have any doubts. Since standing firm and not flip-flopping means standing by one's past social-constructivist efforts, then to admit the need to reexamine policy decisions would be to show signs of Clintonian relativism or to give evidence of empathizing with the views of others. Thus, the right thing to do is to keep on declaring that reality will be what the president wants it to be: tax cuts are good; privatization of Social Security and health-care insurance will be good; the American war on terrorism will succeed; the U.S. will bring democracy to Iraq; the rest of the world will finally go along when they see how we have reconstructed reality.

The second sense in which all of this reflects Bush's postmodernism is in its dependence on power and political will. Since, from a postmodern point of view, there are no pre-constructivist principles that humans should heed, the social construction of reality comes down to who has the most power and who can use it most effectively to shape reality the way they choose. Ignore for a moment the fact that there are different kinds of human power: power of persuasion, power of sound argument, economic power, the power of diplomatic finesse, the power of dependable neighborliness, and many more. President Bush is offended that terrorists can, with so little power, effect so much destruction and change the course of history. The U.S. cannot let that happen. America has greater power than terrorists. We will win.

The American president holds an office of great power domestically as well as internationally. The November 2004 election gave Bush more power, more political capital to spend. He intends to use it. Reality is what one makes of it. Society is constructed by those with the most power and will power. Watch out Congress. Watch out people. Watch out world. Postmodern president, George W. Bush, is on the move.

—The Editor ©