Frozen Ice Balls and the Bush Legacy

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As the clock winds down on what may well be the worst presidency in American history, the Bush administration spin has taken one more surreal twist as Vice President Dick Cheney's aggressively unapologetic stance regarding the administrations policies and actions over the last eight years is tempered by President Bush and those around him urging us not to judge Bush yet, but to take a longer, more historical view of the Bush presidency. Presumably, this is simply what you say at the end of a failed presidency rather than simply admit that failure, but it is worth trying to determine precisely what President Bush means when he asks us to take a more historical perspective on his presidency.

Perhaps Bush hopes or believes that at least for the foreseeable future, scholars and others will borrow a line from the former Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai who when asked, in the late 20th century, what he thought of the French Revolution said it was too early to tell. Perhaps Bush believes that, as the now back in fashion economist John Maynard Keynes wrote more than eighty years ago, "in the long run we are all dead." More likely, as a baseball fan, Bush is placing his faith in the frozen ice ball theory. This theory, alternately attributed to one of two left-handed pitchers from the 1970s, Bill Lee or Tug McGraw, is essentially that in millions of years the sun will go supernova, the earth will turn into a frozen ice ball and nobody will care what Reggie Jackson, Tony Perez or anybody else did against Tug McGraw or Bill Lee with two men on in the World Series. It is probably true that several million years from now, nobody will be around to care about how bad a president George W. Bush was, but I wouldn't want to hang my legacy on that.

What if, however, we took the Bush claim at face value and imagined what historians, sometime before the frozen ice ball theory kicks in, perhaps years or decades from now will say about the Bush presidency? It is very unlikely that history will view the Bush presidency as kindly as the Bush White House and family might like. The Bush presidency will most likely remembered for squandered opportunities and disastrous decisions in foreign policy, mismanagement of the economy, corruption of both a petty and serious nature, creative interpretations of the constitution, and a studied, and malignant, neglect of major issues such as climate change. In fairness, Bush will be remembered for some positive things such as increases in some areas of foreign assistance and in an "other than that Mrs. Lincoln how was the show?" kind of way, keeping the country safe from terrorism after the attacks of September 11th.

The major areas on which Bush will be evaluated will be the same as those on which most presidents are judged, the economy and foreign policy. In these areas, it is likely that his legacy will grow worse, not better, over the next few decades. With regards to the economy, the evaluation will remain unambiguous, Bush inherited a functioning, even prosperous economy, although hardly one without problems or significant flaws, and due largely to a zealous, almost fanatic, aversion to taxes and regulation, will leave office with an economy that while in severe
recession is also plagued by structural problems that will take years to solve. Bush should not be held entirely responsible for these structural problems, but he certainly spent the last eight years making them worse. Even in the throes of the most bizarre Rovian fantasy, it is hard to imagine an economist in the year 2050 or 2100 saying "we should all be grateful for the sound economic management of the Bush administration."

It is the Bush foreign policy, however, that will almost certainly keep historians busiest over the next decades. The most generous historians will give Bush credit for ridding the world of Saddam Hussein who had been one of the worst dictators in recent history. However, even those will have to temper their positive evaluation with a critique of the process by which Bush both took our country to war and how his team conducted that war. The best thing future historians will be able to say accurately about the Iraq war is something to the effect of George W. Bush wanted to go to war in Iraq in the worst way possible-and that's exactly what he did.

It is far more likely that future historians will focus on how Bush allowed international goodwill following the end of the Cold War and the attacks of September 11th, and the accumulated power of the US to drain away into the sands of the Iraqi desert while killing and displacing thousands, wasting billions of dollars and ignoring other serious problems around the world. John McCain's, incessant claims notwithstanding, the surge may be working, but a functioning, peaceful Iraq after the US troops leave, is still a very tenuous proposition. More importantly, the war in Iraq has started an entirely predictable, and predicted, chain of events which has led to far less stability and danger in the greater Middle East. This damage is not irreversible, but if in the future Middle Eastern lemons are turned into lemonade, serious scholars will give the credit where it is due, to the administrations of Barack Obama or perhaps his successors, not to Bush for the mess he made.

Of course, the Middle East is not the only region where Bush foreign policy has been a disaster. Historians will undoubtedly comment upon Bush's years of ignoring the growing strength and malignant role played by Russia in much of Eurasia, and the failure to develop a strategy which recognized the reality of new Russia. It is also telling that as the Bush administration winds down, tensions are heating up between two nuclear powers, but that is only the second most pressing foreign policy issue of the moment. My word limit does not lend itself well to a comprehensive tour of Bush foreign policy mistakes, but the point should be clear by now.

Bush has left the country weaker economically and in a more dangerous unsettled world than the one he found. He has also left the country in more peril from climate change and other environmental threats than it was eight years ago. These are far from short term issues which will go away in a few decades. Unfortunately for Bush, history will judge him and, future frozen ice balls notwithstanding, most historians won't be as forgiving as Bill Lee or Tug McGraw.