

Rove Defends Bush: He's Not Worst President Of Past 50 Years



George W. Bush is the worst United States president of the last fifty years.

In the liberal bastion of New York City's Upper West Side, this rendering of presidential disrepute is generally considered a ghastly understatement. The last fifty years? one resident asked the Huffington Post. How about our nation's history? Why limit it to the United States?

And yet, with this crowd as a backdrop, the proposition of Bush's terribleness was debated on Tuesday night. Spicing up matters: arguing the defense was none other than the architect of the Bush presidency, former adviser Karl Rove.

It promised to be a provocative if not potentially awkward scene -- Bush's so-called "brain" appearing before a crowd whose members considered him complicit in terrible political, if not criminal, misdeeds. And in this regard the affair -- an Oxford-style debate sponsored by the organization, Intelligence-squared -- didn't disappoint.

Over the course of nearly two hours, Rove and his co-defendant, the *Weekly Standard's* Bill Kristol, clawed with, argued against and often talked over *Slate's* Jacob Weisburg and *The Guardian's* Simon Jenkins -- who took up the motion in the affirmative.

The discussions were substantive, touching on topics ranging from Iraq War and detention policies to immigration reform and Republican politics. And the atmosphere was, as expected, charged, with hisses and hollers following arguments from both sides.

But the draw of course was Rove, who seemed at times to be deeply and emotionally invested in the task of defending the presidency he helped create.

"I'm going to make an appeal to the open-minded people of the Upper West Side," he declared in his opening statement, to the laughter of the crowd of roughly 700 people.

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As the other panelists delivered their remarks, Rove wrote furiously in his notebook. He claimed that critics of the president suffered from a "peculiar form of Bush hatred that caused people to lose their rational senses about the man..." and said the political left never gave his former boss his due because they thought the 2000 election "was illegitimate."

When the Jenkins went through a litany of Bush policy failures, Rove termed it a "drive by shooting." When Weisburg challenged the execution of the Iraq War, Rove accused him of delving in fiction and performing an outlandish flip-flop -- as if changing one's mind was some sort of unpardonable offense. And when a questioner asked about his refusal to testify in a "criminal trial," Rove addressed the man directly, said he was unaware of such a trial, and asked him to elucidate what he meant, knowing fully well that it was a reference to the congressional committee that had compelled his testimony.

"I didn't appear before the committee out of a respect for the separation of powers," was the gist of Rove's answer. It is the same one he's given before, only this time it was delivered with a bit more exacerbation, owing perhaps to the countless times he has been asked the question.

Indeed, much of Rove's defense, unlike Kristol's, seemed strained -- not just because he is undoubtedly exhausted from delivering it, but because the weight of history seemed firmly on his mind.

"We were asking the country to do tough things for a long time," he said, when asked to rationalize Bush's low approval ratings. "There have been four president's who have had lower approval ratings: Carter, Nixon, Johnson and Truman... history has judged each man differently after their departure."

It was a convenient answer at best -- leaving out the addendum that a president has never suffered this level of disapproval for such a long period. But, then again, the debate forum was not an exercise in objectivity.

Rove, for example, argued that Barack Obama's win was summarily unimpressive, as he scored just three percentage points more of the popular vote than Bush did in 2004. There was no mentioning of the Electoral College rout enjoyed by the current president-elect.

Kristol, meanwhile, offered proof of Bush's presidential decency by arguing that Obama would not be all that different once in office. "The proof is in the pudding," he said. "Obama is not going to change many of Bush's policies." An obviously narrow reading of the Obama agenda, he failed to note that the Illinois Democrat spent nearly two years campaigning against Bush himself.

Then there were the policy matters. Rove argued that the Bush administration would not have gone to war in Iraq if they had known -- at the time -- that Saddam Hussein lacked weapons of mass destruction, putting aside the reported role Dick Cheney played in cooking the intelligence books to meet that very conclusion.

Later, both he and Kristol argued that U.S. forces had succeeded -- indeed, achieved victory -- in Iraq, only to be reminded by Jenkins that "you can't define success in Iraq when you have two million Iraqi citizens camped outside of Damascus because they are too afraid to return to a country occupied by Americans."

Finally, Rove was pressed to explain how, if the war against terror was a signature Bush success, the United States government had failed to capture Osama Bin Laden during his eight years in office.

"Because he is hiding in a deep dark cave in a very dark corner of what is likely Pakistan," he replied. "Every effort has been made to get him, to get as his communications, his allies and subordinates. And a lot of them are dead. And we haven't heard very much from him either."

There was nothing particularly excruciating about the affair. Indeed, on several occasions Rove received a healthy applause for his answers, such as when he wondered aloud how the other side of the panel could justify Lyndon Johnson's blunders in Vietnam but be sickened by Bush's mishandling of Iraq. On many more occasions, both he and Kristol scored strong debate points -- including a tag-team shout-down of Jenkin's assertion that the Bush administration had targeted Muslim's for detention.

"The point is, you didn't need to do it," said Jenkins.

"We didn't do it!" replied Kristol.

Moreover, the liberal pair of debaters suffered their fair share of grilling by members of the audience -- as well as by Kristol and Rove, who, for example, wondered how Bush could be criticized for steering historic amounts of money towards combating AIDS in Africa solely because he wanted it for groups pushing an abstinence-only agenda.

In fact, after the debate was over, on-site polling results showed that more people had been persuaded to believe that Bush was not the worst president of the last fifty years than were persuaded to affirm his horribleness.

And yet, 68 percent of the audience still claimed the motion was true (again, this is the Upper West Side). And the mere fact that the proposition was being debated seemed to gnaw, ever so slightly, at Rove, the creator of this perceived mess. As the event wore on, the debate remained not on Jimmy Carter or Richard Nixon's follies, but rather all the nitty-gritty missteps performed by the current White House occupant; until finally, it ended with a quite-personal thud.

"[Bush] couldn't open his mind long enough to consider alternatives or consider the fact that he might have been wrong," Weisberg said in his closing remarks. "America's great nepotistic experiment is finally coming to an end."

With additional reporting from Nicholas Graham.