



Is Bush the Worst President in the Last 50 Years?

In Debate Over Bush Legacy, Karl Rove Defends Old Boss but Contradicts Him on WMD

By RUSSELL GOLDMAN

Dec. 3, 2008—

Karl Rove, a close confidant and former adviser to President Bush, said Tuesday he did not believe the administration would have gone to war in Iraq had intelligence indicated Saddam Hussein did not possess weapons of mass destruction, contradicting some of his former boss's previous statements.

At a debate Tuesday night over President Bush's legacy that posed the question whether Bush had been the worst president of the past 50 years, Rove said the administration had been concerned about Hussein's human rights abuses and violations of United Nations sanctions, but it was primarily the worry over weapons that led to the invasion.

"In the aftermath of 9/11, the concern was about a tyrant accused of enormous human rights abuses" and who the administration believed possessed weapons of mass destruction, said Rove, who was Bush's senior adviser until last year. The debate was hosted by Intelligence Squared US, which sponsors a series of Oxford-style debates in front of a live audience in New York City.

"Absent that, I suspect that the administration's course of action would have been to work to find more creative ways to contain him like in the '90s," he said. "Absent the weapons of mass destruction," the administration would not likely have gone to war, he said.

In a recent interview with ABC News' Charles Gibson, Bush said his greatest regret in office was the "the intelligence failure in Iraq" but added it was "hard ... to speculate" about whether he would have invaded had the information been different.

In 2005, however, Bush told Fox News that he "would have still made that decision."

"So, if you had had this -- if the weapons had been out of the equation because the intelligence did not conclude that he had them, it was still the right call?" Fox News' Brit Hume asked during that interview.

"Absolutely," replied Bush.

Weeks before Bush exits the White House and years before historians sit down to write definitive histories of his time in office, Rove and three journalists debated Bush's standing among postwar presidents before an audience on New York's Upper West Side.

Weighing Bush's war in Iraq against Johnson's war in Vietnam, Nixon's criminality versus Bush's caginess, and Carter's stagflation against the ongoing financial crisis, the debaters had not only to consider the Bush administration's pros against its cons but argue whether this president's bucket of missteps outweighed 50 previous years of presidential errors.

War on Terror

Despite the financial crisis, which this week was officially dubbed a recession, the debate focused primarily on the biggest issue of Bush's presidency -- the execution of the Iraq War and the administration's pursuit of terrorists.

The liberals who argued that Bush was indeed the worst president, namely journalists Jacob Weisberg and Simon Jenkins, described the war as a protracted failure, a quagmire built on the lie of weapons of mass destruction, the execution of which alienated our allies and instilled an anti-American fervor in a new generation of young Muslims.

"It simply has been a catastrophe," said Jenkins, a columnist for the British newspaper the Guardian. "The occupation of Iraq is simply the most incompetent thing I have ever seen. Iraq is fairly simple to end, you just leave. ... I cannot accept that it is, in any sense of the word, 'a success.'"

Those defending the president -- Rove and conservative columnist Bill Kristol, who is also editor of The Weekly Standard -- argued that Bush took the fight against Islamic terrorism overseas, creating a fragile but stable democracy in the heart of the Middle East and preventing a single terror attack on U.S. soil since 9/11.

"I think Karl is right, that the president would not have gone to war if -- what seems to be the case -- that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction programs at the time," said Kristol.

"Having said that ... I think it was right to go to war. The Middle East would be much more dangerous if he were still in power. Every radical state and every radical group would be empowered. ... We would have a much more resurgent radicalism in the Muslim world than we have today where it's much more of a mixed bag. And I think many of the terror groups are on the defensive and on the run."

In addition to the mismanagement of the Iraq War, Jacob Weisberg, chairman and editor in chief of the Slate group, a unit of the Washington Post Co., listed the restriction of civil rights, including the right of habeas corpus for enemy combatants, sacrificing American unity after 9/11 and the economic crisis as among Bush's worst offenses.

Bush's Presidency

Though Nixon was corrupt, Weisberg said, he at least opened China to rapprochement. Carter, he said, capped a decade of economic mismanagement and his mishandling of Iran emboldened the Soviets to invade Afghanistan, but at least he could claim the Camp David peace accords between Israel and Egypt as a success.

"Neither rivals Bush for sheer incompetence," Weisberg said, joking that if Kristol and Rove "argue that Bush is only the second-worst president in the last 50 years, that's not much of a defense."

The largely criticized response to Hurricane Katrina was mentioned only once during the debate, by Weisberg, who said it did not even make his top five list of worst incidents.

Rove defended Bush's domestic policies as ardently as the president's foreign policies.

He said No Child Left Behind, the national educational testing program, led to the greatest improvement in test scores in the past 30 years.

"We have seen more improvement in reading, math and science scores than in the past 28 years combined. [Scores] have gone up in the black, brown, poor and rural communities."

Rove claimed the prescription drug benefit as Bush's greatest health care improvement and argued that the Bush tax cut saved the country from earlier economic crisis.

The economy, he said, would have "bottomed out in 2002" if not for "the political moxie to pass [the] \$1.6 trillion stimulus package and long-lasting tax cuts."