

# Anti-Intellectualism in the Modern Presidency: A Republican Populism

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Due to the amplified importance of forging an intimate connection with the American public, modern presidents must adjust their political personalities and leadership. To combat allegations of elitism, recent Republican presidents have adopted anti-intellectualism as a conservative form of populism. Anti-intellectualism is defined as disparagement of the complexity associated with intellectual pursuits, and a rejection of the elitism and self-aware attitude of distinction that is commonly associated with intellectual life. This article focuses on the benefits and costs of anti-intellectualism as a strategic response to the plebiscitary demands of contemporary presidential politics. As I describe it, an anti-intellectual approach to leadership originates from both a president's attitude about intellectual life and his public posturing. Brief case studies of Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush illustrate the political benefits of presidential anti-intellectualism. The limitations of presidential anti-intellectualism are also outlined.

*To those of you who received honors, awards, and distinctions, I say, well done. And to the C students—I say, you, too, can be President of the United States.<sup>1</sup>*

The mood of the crowd that day in New Haven was beyond skeptical—it was downright caustic. As George W. Bush approached the podium to address the graduates, the hisses and boos from the audience were deafening. However, something bordering on remarkable happened during Bush's speech. By utilizing deft self-deprecating humor and a decidedly anti-intellectual tone, Bush managed to win the crowd over. At the end of the speech, the President actually received a hearty round of *applause*. The change in tide was impressive, and Bush's political talent shined brightly. He had disarmed a bunch of Ivy Leaguers with a most unlikely weapon: anti-intellectual humor.<sup>2</sup> Superficial observations about President Bush's anti-intellectualism are abundant amongst journalists, pundits, and even political scientists.<sup>3</sup> How-

ever, the anti-intellectual nature of presidential leadership has not received a full analytical examination. Perhaps this is because as scholars, we loathe to admit the anti-intellectual culture that surrounds us. Despite our disdain, the American presidency is an institution that often embraces anti-intellectualism for political benefit.

This examination scrutinizes the relationship between anti-intellectualism and presidential leadership in the United States. Anti-intellectual posturing is a behavior that often originates from personal attitudes and private experiences, but can develop into a public leadership style with a strategic rationale. In this article, I describe a president's relationship with intellectualism as a continuum of behaviors and attitudes. The conceptual discussion is followed by three short case studies of presidents (Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush) whose leadership posturing place them on the explicitly anti-intellectual end of the spectrum.

## Conceptualizing Anti-Intellectualism

An important first step in conceptualizing anti-intellectualism involves defining its opposite. "Intellectualism" is dedication to acquiring knowledge from reason, contemplation, or analytical thought. As an adjective, "intellectual" describes an individual who engages routinely in this type of behavior or praises its practice. On the other extreme of the ambit, "anti-intellectualism" is the attainment of knowledge through instincts, character, moral sensibilities, and emotions. A person who displays "anti-intellectual" qualities disparages the rational

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complexity associated with intellectual pursuits. Despite these negative opinions, anti-intellectuals are not necessarily unintelligent or dismissive of smart people. Instead, anti-intellectualism is best categorized as a specific type of anti-elitism. Anti-intellectuals exhibit distaste for the smugness and superiority they believe accompanies intellectual life. For anti-intellectuals, the intellectual generates suspicion and cynicism. Intelligence may be valuable and useful, but intellect is dangerous.<sup>4</sup>

Upon examination, presidents and other political elites can be placed along an “intellectual/anti-intellectual” continuum. The permeable nature of the continuum is an integral part of the concept because it is overly simplistic to think of presidents as either “intellectuals” or “anti-intellectuals.” In the continuum I envision, there are two important components. First and foremost is a president’s attitude regarding the *utility* of intellectual life and its pursuits.<sup>5</sup> Is intellectualism embraced or disparaged, valued or vilified? Does the president view the advice of intellectuals as an integral part of his decision-making process? The second part of the continuum is the president’s *public engagement* of intellectual activities. Does the president engage in intellectual activity himself or encourage others to do so? Does he publicly celebrate intellectual contributions, or disparage them?

These two components of the continuum lead to four general categories of presidential leadership. *Pro-intellectuals* believe in the value of intellectual pursuits and engage in such activities. They affirm the usefulness of intellectual life and showcase their intellectual orientations. *Brain trusters* understand the value of intellectual contributions, but do not routinely engage in such pursuits. They are intellectual dabblers; supportive of intellectualism but one step removed from a full embrace. *Intellectual utilitarians* are more scrupulous than the *brain trusters*. They view intellectualism with a practical gaze, and employ intellectuals for advice and counsel. But they also exhibit a condemning public attitude towards intellectuals and intellectualism in a strategic effort to dispel allegations of elitism. Finally, *anti-intellectuals* pose an unfavorable opinion of intellectual life, and often advertise their disparagement. *Anti-intellectuals* may believe in the importance of ideas, but reach conclusions based upon instinctual “gut feelings” rather than intellectual discourse or debate.

Two observations about the political implications of the continuum are worth mentioning. First, as the presidency has developed over time, more presidents have gravitated towards the anti-intellectual end of the spectrum. There has not been an unequivocal *pro-intellectual* president in the post-New Deal era of the modern presidency. Second, Republicans tend to exhibit anti-intellectual qualities, and Democrats coalesce on the intellectual tail of the continuum. This phenomenon is even more pronounced if the presidents of the past fifty years are considered. The

reasons for such a partisan divergence are numerous. They include changing electoral constituencies, the political transformation of the South, the rise of the religious right, and the post-World War II liberalization of academics and intellectuals. Once again, the fluidity of the continuum should not be forgotten. There are no rigid boundaries, and depending on the particular political situation, presidents may alter their position.

In brief case studies, I examine three presidents whose orientations are decidedly anti-intellectual in nature. As I describe it, an anti-intellectual approach to leadership originates from both a president’s attitude about intellectual life and his public posturing. In the case studies that follow, I depict anti-intellectualism as a strategic tool used by modern American presidents to enhance their political authority.<sup>6</sup> Presidents make conscious political decisions about where they fall on the continuum. These decisions reflect personal beliefs, but develop into an important component of their public leadership.

Recent Republican presidents have been particularly adept at capitalizing upon historical developments in the presidency and the media, which have encouraged a shift towards a more anti-intellectual leadership style. In Bruce Miroff’s words, the modern presidency is dependent upon the creation of “spectacles” that encourage awestruck citizens to become passive spectators rather than active participants in politics.<sup>7</sup> Spectacles lend themselves to the portrayal of presidents as energetic, dynamic, hyper-masculine individuals who defeat evil in the name of American democracy, exemplified by George W. Bush’s landing on the USS Abraham Lincoln in 2003. The intellectual process of deliberation cannot constitute a spectacle. Furthermore, the modern presidency is also characterized by its increased assertions of executive independence and unilateral action.<sup>8</sup> The rise of unilateralism encourages presidents to adopt a public anti-intellectual leadership approach. Anti-intellectualism snubs its nose at established experts. Thus, it is a defiant leadership stance—a forceful demonstration of independence. Implicitly, anti-intellectualism conveys the message that the president is in charge and that he answers to no one. Anti-intellectualism stresses simplicity and efficiency, which enables presidents to justify their unilateral actions. I offer brief sketches of how the anti-intellectualism of Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush has contributed to their political leadership and executive authority.

### ***Dwight Eisenhower: Anti-Intellectualism and the Hidden Hand***

Revisionist scholarship analyzing Dwight Eisenhower’s leadership provides strong evidence to support the contention that anti-intellectualism should be considered a strategic response to strengthen political authority. Eisenhower’s

administration marked the beginning of the modern anti-intellectual trend in presidential leadership. Along with the escalation of McCarthyism, the 1952 election between General Eisenhower and the “egghead” Adlai Stevenson gave rise to Richard Hofstadter’s award winning analysis of political culture, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. As both a candidate and president, Eisenhower utilized anti-intellectual posturing to enhance his political leadership.

Despite his brief tenure as president of Columbia University, Eisenhower had no problem portraying himself as an anti-intellectual. He promoted an anti-intellectual persona by emphasizing his pragmatic, no-nonsense demeanor. Eisenhower disdained elitism, and preferred plain-spoken rhetoric to a more ornate style. In addition to his anti-elitist attitude, Eisenhower was not smitten with academics, and publicly expressed his unfavorable opinion of intellectuals. At a 1954 press conference, Eisenhower defined an intellectual as “a man who takes more words than necessary to tell more than he knows.” In a 1953 diary entry, Eisenhower expressed dismay about the mercurial temperaments of Washington insiders, and lamented that “sooner or later we will be unable to get anybody to take jobs in Washington except business failures, college professors, and New Deal lawyers.”<sup>9</sup> Eisenhower was no fan of intellectual life, and often showcased his skepticism for political purposes.<sup>10</sup> As a presidential candidate, Eisenhower’s anti-intellectualism earned him considerable political mileage. During the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower concentrated on cultivating his “ordinary” demeanor and defined himself in contrast to the “egghead” Stevenson. With Stevenson playing the intellectual, Eisenhower became the anti-intellectual foil.

In 1952, the intellectual community immediately embraced Adlai Stevenson. Despite an elite education and an upper-class background, Stevenson was not an intellectual himself. Intellectuals became attracted to Stevenson because he vowed to elevate the level of political discourse in American society, and pledged to “talk sense” throughout the campaign. He was considered the “new Woodrow Wilson” and endeared followers when, at a press conference, he called for “eggheads of the world to unite.” Although Stevenson earned respect and a dedicated following, Eisenhower and his staff viewed Stevenson’s campaign as a fringe movement. The majority of the early 1950s electorate perceived the intellectual as a slightly dangerous oddity. In this regard, Eisenhower had some help from Joseph McCarthy, who charged that Stevenson was unfit for office due to his association with so-called leftist academics, namely Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Bernard DeVoto, James Wechsler, and Archibald MacLeish.<sup>11</sup>

Eisenhower did not attack Stevenson, but merely distanced himself from Stevenson’s weaknesses. In essence, Stevenson’s intellectualism marginalized his candidacy. When Stevenson used sophisticated, intellectual argu-

ments in his speeches, Eisenhower spoke simply and emphasized his affinity for the common man. One voter wrote to the *Detroit News* that “we should have something in common with a candidate for President, and that’s why I’m voting for General Eisenhower.”<sup>12</sup> Eisenhower’s masculinity was undisputed, but the *New York Daily News* observed that Stevenson “trilled” his speeches with his “fruity” voice. “Adelaide’s” melancholy attitude stood in stark contrast to Richard Nixon’s “manly explanation” of his financial affairs in the Checkers speech.<sup>13</sup>

As president, Eisenhower continued to adopt an anti-intellectual approach. As a Republican governing in the aftermath of the New Deal, Eisenhower astutely recognized that he needed to disarm the vitriol of his liberal opponents. Rather than trying to beat the liberals at their own game, Eisenhower concentrated on his popularity outside the Beltway. To this end, Eisenhower acted like an “ordinary guy” rather than an intellectualized policy wonk. Eisenhower strove to cultivate his down to earth image, which was essential for his larger political strategy. Much of his public persona was undoubtedly authentic (there’s no evidence to suggest that Eisenhower didn’t like westerns) but sincerity does not eliminate the strategic component of his actions and words.

In particular, Eisenhower’s distinct rhetorical style often had the effect of speaking to many different audiences at the same time. When writing his 1953 Inaugural, Eisenhower remarked, “I deliberately tried to stay at the level of talk that would make as good reading as possible at the Quai d’Orsay or at No. 10 Downing,” but that also “would sound good to the fellow digging the ditch in Kansas.”<sup>14</sup> Sometimes, Eisenhower was more concerned with hiding his personal interests and proclivities. For example, Eisenhower enjoyed classical music, but kept his hobby hidden from the public eye. He confessed to his personal secretary Ann Whitman that he was “deathly afraid of being considered highbrow.”<sup>15</sup>

None of these observations break new ground for scholars who study Eisenhower’s presidency. However, Eisenhower’s anti-intellectual posturing becomes more relevant when we consider the possibility that subsequent presidents may have imitated him. Ronald Reagan keenly observed the ways in which Eisenhower defined himself against the intellectualized Stevenson. Likewise, it is not a coincidence that George W. Bush placed a bust of Eisenhower in the Oval Office and a portrait of the former president in the Cabinet room.<sup>16</sup> Eisenhower reaped the political benefits of exceeding low expectations, thus paving the way for Reagan and Bush to follow in his path.

### ***Ronald Reagan: Ideologue and Anti-Intellectual***

In 1980, Robert Reich called the Republican presidential win a “triumph of ideas, an intellectual victory.”<sup>17</sup> The great irony of Reich’s statement was that Ronald Reagan

led this “intellectual victory,” a man whom everyone thought personified anti-intellectualism. Reagan’s less than impressive intellectual capacities have been widely discussed and analyzed. Perhaps the most famous comment came from Democratic legend Clark Clifford, who described Reagan as an “amiable dunce.”<sup>18</sup> Haynes Johnson charged that Reagan was neither intellectually curious nor deeply read.<sup>19</sup> Reagan biographer Lou Cannon observed a “growing suspicion that the president has only a passing acquaintance with some of the most important decisions of his administration.”<sup>20</sup> According to news anchor Tom Brokaw, the opinion of Reagan as an intellectual lightweight is part of the “American fabric.” Agreeing with Cannon’s assessment, Brokaw described Reagan as a “gravely under-informed President.”<sup>21</sup> Dinesh D’Souza began his Reagan biography with George Will and Michael Novak rolling their eyes in exasperation after listening to Reagan’s “naïve” musings about Gorbachev and the future of the Soviet Union at a Georgetown cocktail party.<sup>22</sup> Conservatives and liberals alike doubted Reagan’s intellectual abilities. Reagan may not have engaged the world of ideas in a sophisticated way, but there was more to his anti-intellectual political persona than his supposed intellectual deficiencies. Reagan engaged in anti-intellectual posturing for its political value.

When running for governor of California in 1966, Reagan campaigned against the radical politics and protests emanating from state universities. In a 1966 speech at the Cow Palace in San Francisco, candidate Reagan stated:

There has been a leadership gap and a morality and decency gap at the University of California at Berkeley where a small minority of beatniks, radicals, and filthy speech advocates have brought such shame to and such loss of confidence in a great University that applications for enrollment are down 21% and are expected to decline even further.<sup>23</sup>

The accepted intellectual viewpoint from the 1960s was that America’s true inheritance was oppression and discrimination.<sup>24</sup> Reagan challenged this intellectual viewpoint directly, contending that the true legacy of America involved a commitment to freedom and traditional morals. When Reagan began his campaign, the rowdiness at Berkeley and other college campuses was not a salient issue. By routinely discussing problems with university life in his speeches, Reagan actively sought to make it a campaign issue.<sup>25</sup> Reagan insisted that faculty members serve as *in loco parentis* and floated the idea that professors should adhere to a code of conduct that would set an example for the students they taught.<sup>26</sup>

Reagan’s attacks upon the intellectual establishment were very popular amongst Californians who were transplants from either the Midwest or the South. His assault upon the radical politics of universities fit into his larger message that unless a drastic intervention occurred, California

was headed for a moral collapse. Reagan viewed faculty and students as troublemakers and “self-indulgent snobs” who were “contemptuous of middle class values.”<sup>27</sup> Consequently, Reagan targeted academics in his quest for moral reform.

As governor, Reagan continued his battle with the California university system; he called in the California Highway Patrol and the National Guard to “restore order” on campuses across the state. He made it clear that students did not attend college for the sake of learning. Instead, Reagan believed in the pragmatic value of a university education; college was a vehicle for personal advancement.<sup>28</sup> Reagan’s decisive actions in California fostered an anti-intellectual, anti-academic reputation that stayed with him throughout his political career.

Reagan’s anti-intellectualism also stemmed from his deep ideological beliefs. A scholar of Reagan’s rhetoric, Kiron Skinner, observed that in the White House, Reagan lacked intellectual curiosity and a robust work ethic. By the time he became president, Reagan had already thought carefully about the most important political issues facing the country. His ideology and philosophy were firmly in place. In 1981, Reagan’s beliefs were part of his own persona. According to Skinner, the presidency must have been “slightly boring” experience for Reagan.<sup>29</sup> He knew the direction he wanted to lead the country, and it was now up to his staff to figure out the details and implement the solutions.

An anecdote illustrates Reagan’s reliance upon ideology rather than intellectual prowess. Prior to an important international economic summit, Reagan’s staff provided the president with a long briefing book the evening before a jam-packed day of meetings, speeches, and interviews. In the morning, Reagan came to breakfast looking bleary-eyed. As his staff exchanged glances of worry, Reagan confessed that he was not tired because he had spent last night reading the briefing book, but because he had stayed up late to watch one of his favorite movies, *The Sound of Music*. Communications director David Gergen panicked—Reagan had not prepared at all for the economic summit. Despite his lack of preparation, Reagan performed well that day, engaging world leaders, the press, and audience members on a variety of pressing economic issues.<sup>30</sup> Reagan’s ideology was firmly in place; he felt he did not have to do his “homework” to perform adequately. The antiseptic rationales behind the policies were unimportant; what really mattered was an unwavering belief in the script. Reagan demonstrated that day he did not need briefing books or intellectual advice.

Lastly, Reagan understood the political benefits of anti-intellectual posturing. Based upon his political strategy, Reagan transformed the Republican Party from an organization based upon East Coast elitism to western populism. Former adviser Ed Meese remarked, “Reagan wanted to be known as a person of the people, not like an Adlai

Stevenson.”<sup>31</sup> Reagan realized the value of his anti-elitist persona and protected it. Press secretary Marlin Fitzwater visited Reagan one night and saw that the President had several books and academic journals strewn across his desk in the Oval Office. Fitzwater asked Reagan if he was actually reading these books and articles. Reagan replied affirmatively. Fitzwater then told Reagan that he might use this fact in an upcoming press conference, particularly when reporters implied that Reagan was intellectually inferior or lazy. In response, Reagan told Fitzwater that he did not think it was a good idea to advertise his intellectual repertoire. Reagan liked playing the underdog, and understood the value of being underestimated in politics. He did not want to taint the anti-intellectual, anti-elitist portrait that the American public had already accepted and embraced.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Political Independence of George W. Bush*

Because George W. Bush has reawakened interest in the topic of American anti-intellectualism, it is appropriate to end with a discussion of his leadership. Bush’s anti-intellectualism is a product of his personal life experiences and his political acumen. Bush’s anti-intellectual style is not purely contrived; ample evidence suggests that he internalized the harsh criticisms of his father waged by Ivy League intellectuals. The definitive Bush biography entitled *First Son* provides an astonishing account of Bush’s pervasive, lifetime disdain for intellectuals. Repeatedly in the book, stories are recounted in which northeastern elites from Harvard and Yale chastised George W. or his father.<sup>33</sup> These incidents left a major imprint on the younger Bush, and undoubtedly influenced his attitude concerning intellectual life. Bush has never tried to hide the fact that he does not appreciate the intrinsic worth of intellectual activities, such as reading long books on ethics or public policy.<sup>34</sup> His failed nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court strongly supports the notion that Bush values personal loyalty much more than building the intellectual heft of the conservative movement.

But more important than any psychological rationale is the political lesson Bush learned when he ran for Congress as a young man in Midland, Texas. Bush’s Democratic opponent, Kent Hance, portrayed Bush as a privileged, Ivy League kid who wasn’t really a Texan. When asked about the fact that he often chose to downplay his “intellectual side” as he campaigned for the presidency, Bush responded, “We’re all sums of our experience. Kent Hance gave me a lesson in country-boy politics. He was a master at it, funny and belittling. I vowed never to get out-countried again.”<sup>35</sup> In his 1978 Congressional campaign, Bush allowed his opponent to portray him as a northeastern elite. The valuable lesson Bush learned from that experience was that his esteemed background could be a liability as well as a political asset. From that day

forward, anti-intellectualism would become an integral part of Bush’s political persona.

Bush’s anti-intellectualism is strategic in the sense that it helps him recast any political descriptions that have been ascribed to him. More specifically, Bush uses his anti-intellectualism to surpass expectations, develop a “conservative” populism, showcase his moralism, and declare political independence. Bush learned from his unsuccessful congressional bid that winning candidates create their own histories and lore. Bush’s anti-intellectualism enabled him to tell the story he *wanted* to tell rather than the story of the eastern blue-blood “first son.”

In their biography entitled *Shrub: The Short but Happy Political Life of George W. Bush*, Molly Ivins and Lou Dubose warned, “Don’t underestimate George W. Bush.”<sup>36</sup> Bush’s anti-intellectualism enables his portrayal as the political underdog. During the 2000 campaign, it was widely accepted that Bush was less intelligent than his challenger, Al Gore. The initial strategic reaction to this perception might be to combat it—to showcase Bush in situations that would highlight his mental capacities. Instead of this obvious reaction, the Bush campaign twisted Bush’s supposed intellectual deficiency to work in his favor. By the time the much-publicized television debates rolled around, Bush had played the “underachiever” card so effectively, he simply articulated a few solid arguments to outperform the low expectations that had been assigned to him.

Like both Eisenhower and Reagan, Bush’s anti-intellectualism also serves as an attempt to infuse conservatism with a healthy dose of populism. Anti-intellectualism helps Bush deflect potential accusations that label him or his policies as elitist or elite-driven. Bush’s anti-intellectual populism is not traditional populism, based upon class warfare or economic inequalities. Instead, populism for Bush emphasizes authenticity. Historian Michael Beschloss explained that Bush’s popularity stems from the widespread belief that “he is a guy with guts.”<sup>37</sup> His plain-spoken, folksy demeanor wipes away any semblance of privilege, and if pushed about his background, Bush often denies its influence entirely.<sup>38</sup> Karl Rove is anything but secretive about portraying Bush as a populist. In a meeting with reporters, Rove cited Bush’s support for the dividend tax cut as evidence that the president was a populist, arguing that Bush prefers “Main Street” over “Wall Street.”<sup>39</sup> In 2002, Rove compared Bush’s leadership style to Andrew Jackson’s, inviting historian Robert Remini to the White House for a discussion on the subject.<sup>40</sup> The Bush administration excels at creating its own political definitions.<sup>41</sup> If Bush suffers from accusations of elitism, Republican strategists respond by making him an anti-intellectual populist. Never mind that the shoe doesn’t fit exactly—the key is to change the meanings of “populism” to suit Bush’s agenda.

Beyond populism, Bush’s anti-intellectualism showcases his overtly moral leadership style. Bush’s anti-intellectualism

and moralism are complementary and reinforcing. Bush's need for clarity and the desire to minimize complexities are components of his anti-intellectualism, and these characteristics buttress the categorical moralism he often espouses. Bush's moral instincts guide his decision-making; it is a self-described visceral process. In a lengthy interview with Bob Woodward, Bush erupted when questioned about North Korea. Woodward describes Bush's reaction:

The president sat forward in his chair. I thought he might jump up, he became so emotional as he spoke about the North Korean leader. "I loathe Kim Jong Il!" Bush shouted, waving his finger in the air. "I've got a visceral reaction to this guy, because he is starving his people. . . . It is visceral. Maybe it's my religion, maybe it's my—but I feel passionate about this."<sup>42</sup>

By definition, a visceral reaction cannot be reflective; it comes from the "gut" or from deep-seeded beliefs that are firmly rooted in place. Bush's instincts originate from his religion, and although no one doubts his sincerity when it comes to his faith, such proclamations are also politically beneficial: Bible-believing Christians are the President's strongest backers.<sup>43</sup>

Bush is comfortable dealing with the religious wing of the Republican Party, and after serving as his father's liaison to the religious right during the 1988 campaign, he is a bona-fide veteran. But the genius of the Bush combo (anti-intellectualism + moralism) goes beyond his obvious appeal to evangelicals. Bush's unique blend also appeals to secular moderates. Michael Gerson, Bush's former chief speechwriter, translated Bush's ideas into a buoyant language that resonates with religious and non-religious crowds.<sup>44</sup> Beyond scripted rhetoric, his frequent use of the word "evil" evokes both a secular masculine image ("wanted dead or alive") and a religious overtone (from the Psalms). The mixture of moralism and anti-intellectualism delivers the message of firmness that Bush seeks to convey. There is no room for doubt, and very little time for deliberation and debate.

Finally, there is an independent bravado about Bush—personified by his anti-intellectualism—that supplants the formal constitutional powers of the office. This self-confidence made Bush in the immediate months following September 11 unusually suited for the presidency, which is, above all, an office that rewards independent action. Bush has admitted that the "wanted dead or alive" comments after the 9/11 terrorist attacks were motivated by a "little bit of bravado" and also the "self-defense of America."<sup>45</sup> But Bush's independent decisiveness doesn't end with his casual remarks to reporters. His view of the presidency itself is more revealing. When asked if he justified his "provocative" leadership style to his advisers, he responded:

Of course not. I'm the commander—see, I don't need to explain—I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the

interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation.<sup>46</sup>

Taken in the context of the interview, Bush's statement is not a tyrannical assertion, as some journalists or pundits imply. Rather, it is a simplistic and clear pronouncement of his political independence, a self-confident understanding of the constitutional powers he possesses.

Bush's anti-intellectualism also advertises the particular characteristics he believes presidents should possess. In recent town hall discussions about Social Security, Bush frequently appeared with an expert, often stating, "I'm a C-student. He's the PhD. He's the adviser. I'm the president. What does that tell you?"<sup>47</sup> By using his "expert" as a foil, Bush strongly implied that the presidency is no fit for intellectuals. Instead, the presidency is a place for someone who knows intuitively what the American people want, and can act resolutely on their behalf.

Bush's difficulties in his second term demonstrate that relying heavily upon anti-intellectual posturing creates political problems. Bush's persona has generated an expectation of decisiveness, which was absent during the Hurricane Katrina crisis. The subsequent change in Bush's demeanor was noticeable.<sup>48</sup> After enduring several weeks of criticism, Bush appeared defeated at an October 2005 press conference. Instead of displaying the bold assuredness he routinely exudes, Bush murmured answers unenthusiastically and looked as though he would rather be somewhere else. The same can be said for his public leadership on Iraq. Under fire for the continued violence and unrest, Bush's attempts at unwavering independence sounded awkward rather than defiant. The convoluted claim that he is a "decider who decides what's best" failed to deflect strong criticism of his and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's wartime leadership.

Bush's lackluster performance illustrates a risk presidents take when they make anti-intellectualism a dominant political script. Anti-intellectual leaders generate the perception that they know what to do in any given situation because they base their decisions upon a reliable resource—their gut instincts. Consequently, if instinctual leadership fails, criticisms are aimed at the very essence of the individual in question, which can generate a spiraling crisis of confidence. When the chips are down and the swagger of self-confidence must be banished, the question is whether Bush will be able to move away from the bravado of anti-intellectualism and adopt a new political script that better fits the political circumstances he now faces.

## Anti-Intellectualism in American Political Life

The relationship between intellectuals and democratic life is inherently uneasy. Intellectuals in a democracy remain

conflicted with the elite character of their own achievements and their egalitarian inclinations. There are exceptions to this rule, such as France, in which intellectuals can serve a quasi-institutionalized role in the political process. But in the United States, the relationship between political elites and intellectuals remains rocky. Unlike the specific authority granted to prime ministers in a parliamentary system, American presidents must seek authority when they can and claim legitimacy using all available political mechanisms.<sup>49</sup> Over time, the presidency has become a more plebiscitary institution, and in response to this development, Republican presidents have adopted anti-intellectualism as a political tactic. The three brief case studies showed presidents using anti-intellectualism to disarm their political opponents and forge a stronger popular connection.

George W. Bush is perhaps the most skilled operator of anti-intellectualism. Bush's anti-intellectualism encouraged his political opponents to underestimate his capabilities. In particular, the ability to rebuff opposition is particularly valuable in the current ideologically charged political climate. Analytical arguments can be disputed, but instinctual leadership that bases itself on time-honored values and beliefs is difficult to neutralize. Bush's visceral responses generate an aura of confidence that energized his base and rebuffed his opponents during his first four years in office. In his second term, Bush's anti-intellectualism reached its limits of effectiveness, but its impact on two presidential campaigns and four years of governance makes it a noteworthy political script that presidential scholars should not ignore.

The political use of anti-intellectualism is not entirely the product of institutional structure, changing electoral demographics, plebiscitary politics, or American culture. It would be remiss to neglect the role intellectuals have played in this evolving drama. The professionalization and expansion of the academy has altered common opinions about intellectualism in the United States. Academics now engage in technical dialogues within their disciplines that have grown increasingly specialized and esoteric. This detachment has changed how Americans perceive intellectual life. Decades ago, Richard Hofstadter wrote for academic historians *and* the average citizen interested in history. Now that academic careers depend more on peer recognition and engagement with the literature of a specific discipline, the likelihood of widespread societal influence has diminished. By reinforcing the perception of a separated ivory tower elite, the disengagement of American intellectuals encourages political accusations of irrelevance.

The current status of intellectuals as a political punching bag is unfortunate, but it is not the most serious problem created by presidential anti-intellectualism. The glaring dilemma at hand is that an inverse relationship has developed between the increasing demands of presidential lead-

ership and its current institutional incentives. In this sense, anti-intellectualism is an indicator of the larger structural tensions that frustrate American presidential leadership. The political benefit of anti-intellectualism is the pseudo-egalitarian connection it forges between presidents and the public. The danger is that the political importance of this supposed populist connection has supplanted the more intricate, policy-oriented debate that should serve as the hallmark of deliberation in an extended democratic republic.

## Notes

- 1 Bush 2001.
- 2 Frum 2003, 29–30. Frum tells the story that when one of the presidential speechwriters discovered an arcane fact about Yale history, he told President Bush, who asked him if he went to Yale. The speechwriter replied that he had not. Bush responded, “Well, you didn’t miss much.”
- 3 Berke 2000; Weisberg 1999; Chait 1999; Gitlin, 2000; Brookhiser 2003.
- 4 For the difference between intellect and intelligence, see Hofstadter 1963, 24–51.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 6 For a different approach to studying anti-intellectualism, see Lim 2003.
- 7 Miroff 2003.
- 8 Moe and Howell 1999.
- 9 Eisenhower 1996, 27.
- 10 As president of Columbia, Eisenhower was dedicated to improving the institutional life of the university, but never showed much interest in the academic disciplines. He considered himself as an institutional, rather than intellectual, leader. See Eisenhower 1996, xviii.
- 11 Johnston 1952.
- 12 Hofstadter 1963, 226.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 227.
- 14 Bose and Greenstein 2002, 187.
- 15 Pach and Richardson 1991, 44.
- 16 Frum 2003, 53–54.
- 17 Troy 2002, 143.
- 18 Clifford made the remark at a private dinner party. Unbeknownst to him, the hostess of the party, who had fallen ill earlier in the day, had conversations recorded so she could listen to them. Clifford's comments were released publicly, and became infamous.
- 19 Johnson 1991, 49.
- 20 Cannon 1982.
- 21 Hertsgaard 1988, 149.
- 22 D’Souza 1997, 1.
- 23 Reagan 1968, 125.
- 24 Hecl 2003, 23.

- 25 Johnson 1991, 80.  
 26 Reagan 1968, 127.  
 27 Dallek 1999, 46.  
 28 Stuckey 1989, 110.  
 29 Skinner 2001.  
 30 Gergen 2000, 151–52.  
 31 Personal interview, Ed Meese, September 14, 2004.  
 32 Personal interview, Martin Anderson, July 26, 2004.  
 33 The most famous and widely quoted incident was George W. Bush's interaction with Yale chaplain William Sloan Coffin, who supposedly told Bush (a freshman) that a "better man" had beaten his father for the Senate in Texas. See Minutaglio 1999, 85. Minutaglio writes that for the next thirty-five years, the encounter with Coffin resonated in George W. Bush's mind.  
 34 When Tucker Carlson interviewed Bush for the September 1999 issue of *Talk* magazine, he asked the Texas governor to name his weaknesses. Bush replied, "Sitting down and reading a 500-page book on public policy or philosophy or something."  
 35 Isaacson 2000, 55.  
 36 Ivins and Dubose 2000, 43.  
 37 CBS News, 2002. "Face the Nation." December 1.  
 38 Isaacson 2000, 55. Bush explained, "Someone once said of my dad that he got to Texas a little too late in life, he was already well bred. That wasn't the case with me."  
 39 Milbank 2003.  
 40 Milbank 2002.  
 41 Skowronek 2005, 819.  
 42 Woodward 2002, 340.  
 43 Fineman 2003.  
 44 For example, in his September 20, 2001 speech in front of a joint session of Congress, Bush stated, "Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done." The reference to "justice" conveys both religious and secular meanings.  
 45 Woodward 2002, 100–01.  
 46 *Ibid.*, 145–46.  
 47 Leibovich 2005.  
 48 VandeHei and Baker, 2005.  
 49 For a more comprehensive discussion on this point, see Galvin and Shogan 2004.
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