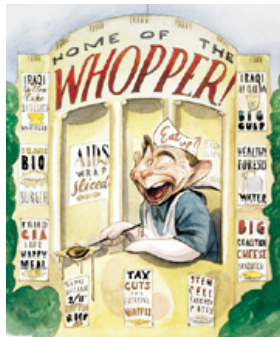


NATIONAL AFFAIRS

The House of Bush

Rep. strategist Kevin Phillips on the Bush family's hunger for power

By Eric Bates



Serving up secrets and lies

Listening to Kevin Phillips talk about politics, it's easy to mistake him for a populist firebrand from the 1890s. He rails against the growing inequality of wealth in America. He bemoans the unprecedented influence that private corporations hold over public institutions. He attacks the "smug conservatism" of George W. Bush and accuses the president of attempting to establish a family dynasty better suited to royalist England than to democratic America.

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But Phillips is no left-wing demagogue. He's not only a lifelong Republican, he's also the guy who literally wrote the book that became the blueprint for the party's dominance of presidential politics. Phillips served as the chief political strategist for Richard Nixon in 1968, and, in *The Emerging Republican Majority*, he formulated the "Southern Strategy" that helped hand the White House to the GOP for a generation.

In his new book *American Dynasty*, Phillips lays out his almost visceral distaste for what he calls "the politics of deceit in the House of Bush," accusing the administration of dishonesty and secrecy that would make Tricky Dick blush. He traces the course of Bush's family over the past 100 years, detailing how they sought influence "in the back corridors" of the oil and defense industries, investment banking and the intelligence establishment. Elites, not elections, put Bush in power. "I'm not talking about ordinary lack of business ethics or financial corruption," says Phillips, who recently registered as an Independent for the first time. "Four generations of building toward dynasty have infused the Bush family's hunger for power and practices of crony capitalism with a moral arrogance and backstage disregard of the democratic and republican traditions of the U.S. government." As a result, he says, "deceit and disinformation have become Bush political hallmarks."

Is Bush really any worse than Nixon?

What makes the Bush family so different -- and, in many ways, so dangerous -- is that they've created a dynasty. The second Bush administration is a political restoration, not unlike the English Stuarts in 1660 or the French Bourbons in 1815. In the last election, the Republican Party turned to the eldest son of the Republican who got the boot eight years earlier. That's what this country fought a revolution to get rid of in 1776. Nobody thought that there would be another royal house, with a couple of Georges.

Royal house? Isn't that a bit of a stretch?

The family has made a big deal of the notion that it is descended from royalty. *Burke's Peerage* even got involved in the last election, saying that Bush won because he had the most royal ancestry. The Bushes eat this stuff up. They don't need democracy -- they feel entitled by ancestry. For them, the presidency is something that can be won with a Supreme Court decision.

Still, what's so bad about a son succeeding his father as president?

This type of dynasty is antithetical to the American political tradition. The presidency is now subject to inherited views, inherited staff, inherited wars, inherited money, inherited loyalties. I'm not talking about particular policies -- I'm talking about a unique evolution of a corrupting institutional process in American governance.

If this is a dynasty, who's next? Jeb?

He's the logical choice. If they decide there needs to be a gap, you might have Jeb's son, Neil P., in twenty years. Given Hillary's position in the polls, it could go back to the Clinton's first. People are obviously willing to play the relatives game right now.

How are the Bushes viewed within the Republican Party?

There was always a sense that George H.W. Bush was somebody who didn't owe anything to voters -- he couldn't even win an election for Congress. His push came from people behind the scenes, from the Establishment. Both his grandparents were heavily involved in wartime finance and military contracting during World War I -- they were there at the very start of the military-industrial complex -- and his father was a U.S. senator who directed an oil-services company like Halliburton. They had ties to big money, big oil and the Eastern old-boys network.

Bush's enemies in the party were people who were insulted by the way he played on his privilege and connections. Richard Nixon was one; Ronald Reagan was another. Donald Rumsfeld didn't like him, either -- he and a lot of others in the Ford administration thought Bush was a lightweight. In one of Rumsfeld's greatest miscalculations, he put Bush in charge of the CIA, thinking that would ice Bush's political future. Instead, it was like throwing Bush in the briar patch. There had been rumors for years that Bush had been recruited by the agency, perhaps even when he was a student at Yale. As director, he became near-family and a business associate of Saudi princes. He funneled arms to Saddam Hussein and then, as president, fought the first Gulf War to oust Saddam from Kuwait. And he was implicated in scandals involving the Iran hostages and BCCI, the rogue bank that financed clandestine arms deals.

What does that have to do with the current administration?

By the time George W. came in, he was a product of a family that was more embroiled in the Middle East than almost any other American family -- to say nothing of any other major American political family. The administration has not been interested in turning over any rocks that represent Saudi Arabia, because the Bush family has been in bed with them for so long. In addition, many of the people surrounding the president are former retainers of his father. They wanted to nail Saddam because he got away from them before. That's a central element of restorations: the settling of old scores.

And the continuation of old favors?

Enron is a prime example of that. No other presidential family has made such prolonged efforts on behalf of a single corporation. This was the first scandal spread out over two generations, and it was the biggest in terms of size. Enron was the nation's fifth-largest company when it went belly up -- it had a lot more impact on the economy than the small oil companies in the Teapot Dome scandal. Ken Lay needed government favoritism, and the Bushes supplied it. George W. made calls to drum up business for him in Texas, and George H.W. made Lay the chief planner for a G-7 meeting, which helped Enron get approval for major overseas projects. Thanks in large part to the Bushes, Enron received more than \$7 billion in government subsidies.

Religion played a major role in W's victory. How does his relationship to the religious right differ from, say, Reagan's?

In moral terms, Reagan wasn't exactly running the Bluenose Express -- he was the first American president to be married to two different Hollywood movie stars. He knew how to put on a good show when he was talking to the religious right, but there wasn't a whole lot they were going to get out of him. And when it came to Bush's father, the religious right thought he was some guy with striped pants who came from these schools where their fathers had been janitors. They didn't relate to him at all.

George W. is another story. He's a guy who's been born again, who believes in a lot of what the religious right does. He's Reagan quadrupled in terms of his holier-than-thou, I'm-the-Messiah attitude. He sort of fell into national politics serving as his father's representative to the religious right in 1986. It was right around the time that he was finding religion himself -- and the time that fundamentalists and evangelicals, having made their big splash with Reagan, were beginning to institutionalize power within the state Republican parties and a national framework. George W. spent enormous amounts of time with these people, and he learned how to walk the walk and talk the talk. He is able to be so strong with the religious right because he got inside their whole setup. He can figure out how much to give them to get them on his side and keep them under control. For the first time in history, the president of the United States is the acknowledged leader of the religious right.

How has that role shaped his approach to the war on terrorism?

Based on his support among fundamentalists and evangelicals, I would say that a slight majority of the people who voted for him probably believe in Armageddon. After 9/11, that allowed him to think of himself as somebody who has an almost God-accorded role. He sees himself as an anointed leader, and his speeches evoke religious code words: *evil*, *crusade*, *the ways of Providence*, *wonder-working power*. One biblical scholar who analyzed Bush's speech to the nation on October 7th, 2001, announcing the U.S. attack on Afghanistan, identified a half-dozen veiled borrowings from the Book of Revelation, Isaiah, Matthew and Jeremiah.

Besides religion, how has the Republican Party changed since your days with Nixon?

In some ways, you could say that Reagan was a halfway point. Reagan was tired of government programs, but he didn't want to dismantle the New Deal -- he just didn't want those programs to get

out of hand. George W. grew up in a family where they never needed a safety net in the course of the twentieth century -- and they weren't interested in anyone who did. He believes private charity will take care of the needy.

Reagan also didn't believe in preemptive war. He talked tough, but there wasn't this whole theology in place, like we've seen in the last couple of years, that says, "We're entitled to fry anybody we want."

Can Bush be defeated?

History shows that restored dynasties eventually overdo it and tank themselves -- but it usually takes more than four years. The French Bourbons were restored in 1815 and got the heave-ho in 1830. The English Stuarts were restored in 1660 and ejected in 1688. The problem is, the other side gets dismantled by the restoration and can't mount an effective opposition.

What should Democrats do to beat Bush?

The economy is obviously still iffy, and Bush could sag hugely if Iraq turns into a civil war. But I also think the Republicans are as ideologically overextended today as the Democrats were in the 1960s. They're vulnerable on religion. John McCain actually ran against all of George W.'s games with Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson and Bob Jones University in 2000, and he didn't do badly. He didn't take a goddamn poll -- he just went out there and said all the stuff the Democrats don't have the guts to say.

I think half of the Democrats are afraid of their own shadow. That's why Howard Dean has been so successful. Even if he made mistakes, he had something to say, and he had the courage to say it. And that'll go a long way when you've got so many Establishment politicians who basically just look for whatever the received wisdom is and put a little maraschino cherry on it. If Dean and Al Gore can get the Democrats to face the Republicans' obvious weaknesses, maybe we'll see a real blueprint. But if it's emerging, it's still very quiet.

What would that blueprint look like?

You have to focus on the Bush family itself. They have made the presidency into an office infused with an almost hereditary dishonesty. There's so much lying and secrecy and corruption to it. Just look at the way Neil and Jeb and Marvin and George W. have earned their livings, with all these parasitic operations: profiting from their political connections, cashing in on favors from big corporations and other governments. It's a convergence of arrogance -- the sense that you don't have to pay attention to democratic values. It's happening again with Halliburton. They can't help but let their old cronies in there to make buckets of money off the war.

Their own arrogance provides a handle for their defeat. If the country does not come to grips with what Bush has done, then we may lose what we value about our republican and democratic government.

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