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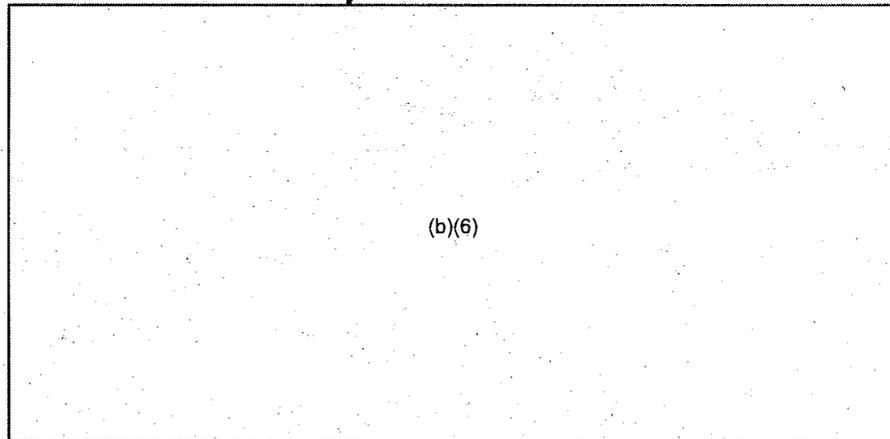
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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

20. Sept. 2003

Dear John,

It's probably impolitic or inappropriate
for the subject of a review to thank
the reviewer, but thanks — your
REASON piece downplaying both the
Dohose, et al and Moore/Slater books
was much appreciated.



SEP 25 2003

Anyway, thanks for putting things in
perspective.

Best regards,
Karl Rove



KARL ROVE
SENIOR ADVISOR TO THE PRESIDENT

THE WHITE HOUSE

(202) 456-2989

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, DC 20502

Professor John J. Pitney, Jr.
Claremont McKenna College
Government Department
850 Columbia Avenue
Claremont, California 91711-6420

2000 election and the early Bush presidency. His treatment of the 2002 midterm is particularly valuable, as the president's party managed the unusual feat of gaining seats in both the House and Senate. Notwithstanding the GOP's rhetorical devotion to decentralization, Cannon describes a "top-down Bush era Republican Party" in which Rove made many of the key campaign decisions, including the emphasis on tax cuts and the recruitment of strong Senate candidates such as Norm Coleman of Minnesota.

In *Bush's Brain*, Texas journalists James C. Moore and Wayne Slater credit Rove with a vital decision

In Washington, there are two kinds of politicians with a stake in hyping Rove's influence: Republicans and Democrats.

that won Bush the 2000 campaign. Though West Virginia had long voted Democratic in close presidential races, Rove noticed that Clinton-Gore policies on gun control and the environment had irked the state's many hunters and mineworkers. He had the Bush campaign fight hard for the state while the Gore forces took it for granted. On election night, Bush won its five electoral votes, without which he would have lost the race.

The authors' account of the battle of West Virginia sheds some light on Bush's policies as president. Since the state is so pivotal, do not expect the administration to tack leftward on the Second Amendment or mining regulations. Supporters of limited government will find that much encouraging. On the other hand, the votes of West Virginia steelworkers

were on policy makers' minds when they hiked steel tariffs last year.

Unfortunately, this intelligent account of Rove's West Virginia strategy is the only good thing about *Bush's Brain*. The rest is a mess—not just bad, but bad the way Steven Seagal movies, Yugo convertibles, and muskrat-flavored yogurt is bad.

To begin with, the book is disturbingly laden with factual errors. Moore and Slater say, for example, that Rove styled the 2000 Bush campaign "after the work of Mark Hanna, an industrialist at the turn of the twentieth century." Rove has indeed compared the current period to the McKinley era. But he has explained that the better-known Hanna was just the GOP's money man, whereas its chief strategist—and Rove's role model—was not Hanna but Charles Dawes. Then an obscure thirtysomething lawyer, Dawes went on to a stellar career as budget director, vice president, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Moore and Slater's error is important. By missing Rove's true influence, they botch an important lead. Rove's fascination with Dawes could offer important clues about his worldview. (*Boy Genius* does get the Dawes reference right, but doesn't do much with it. Any future biography of Rove ought to develop it in depth.)

Moore and Slater also say that Rove tried to counter the Bush-as-Dumbo image by planting a story in the *National Review* listing all the big books that Bush had read. John J. Miller, the author of the story, replied in the *National Review Online*: "This is flatly wrong—or at least seriously misleading. Rove was not 'the source of the article.' I did speak with him and quote him, but he was one source among many. He was not even the originating source of the story, in the sense that I got the idea for it somewhere else."

Where *Bush's Brain* is not provably wrong, it relies overmuch on uneducated speculation. For instance, the authors devote two chapters to a 1986 incident in which Rove claimed that someone had bugged his office. He was running the

in his or her own way with the four Ds, yet always refusing to make a "fetish out of nihilism."

If *Existential America* fails short in any way, it is that Cotkin at times inveighs against contemporary America as "a culture saturated with the consolation of easy salvation" through easily gotten material goods and worldly success. Such a culture, he fears, breeds smugness, shallowness, and superficiality.

In such moments, he fails to appreciate that it is precisely the relative richness of lifestyle options, including banal ones, which predisposes us to existentialism and its insistence that "we must act." The freedom—however incomplete it may be—that has allowed Americans to constantly reinvent themselves in ways unimaginable in Europe is hardly an impediment to a deep and continuing appreciation of existentialism.

Indeed, the acts of choosing we necessarily make on a daily basis—in the marketplace, in the workplace, in how we live—are its very essence. ■

Nick Gillespie (gillespie@reason.com) is Reason's editor-in-chief.



Republican campaign for governor of Texas, and he hinted that Democrats might be responsible. At the time, some reporters suspected that Rove had concocted the whole thing in order to discredit the other side. "Maybe Rove did not plant the bug," say Moore and Slater, but it is "hard to disconnect him from culpability in the incident."

Why exactly do they think this? Rove had spoken of seeing *Power*, the

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silly Richard Gere movie about political consulting. In that movie, Gere finds a listening device in his phone. So that's where Rove must have gotten the idea, right? (I've seen *The Godfather* dozens of times, but I have not put a single horse's head in anybody's bed, or even thought about doing so.)

The ratio of speculation to fact in *Bush's Brain* goes way up as its story stretches into the Bush presidency. Moore and Slater have few sources in Washington's GOP community, so they depend on conjectures from fellow outsiders. It's like covering the Super Bowl by talking to people who couldn't get tickets.

After the September 11 attacks, they note, a former associate of Rove wrote an editorial saying that American foreign policy had helped spawn terrorism. He e-mailed a copy to Rove, who never answered. (It's possible that a senior White House aide might have been a tad busy at the time.) A right-wing Web site then posted the editorial, drawing volumes of angry e-mail to the author's inbox. Was Rove responsible, as his former friend suspects? "There was simply no way of knowing, not for sure," Moore and Slater admit, but nevertheless dwell on the tale at some length.

The authors' assessments of the power Rove wields in the Bush White House makes them sound like the coke-addled Sherlock Holmes ranting about Professor Moriarty in *The Seven-Percent Solution*: "He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city. He is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker. He has a brain of the first order." They even refer to the Cuban embargo as "the Rove doctrine." Egad, Eisenhower imposed

a partial embargo in 1960, and JFK expanded it the next year. Talk about a "boy genius"—Rove was in grade school at the time. Would Bush drop the embargo if Rove went off the payroll? And given the Cuban vote in the pivotal state of Florida, would Gore have dared to change it?

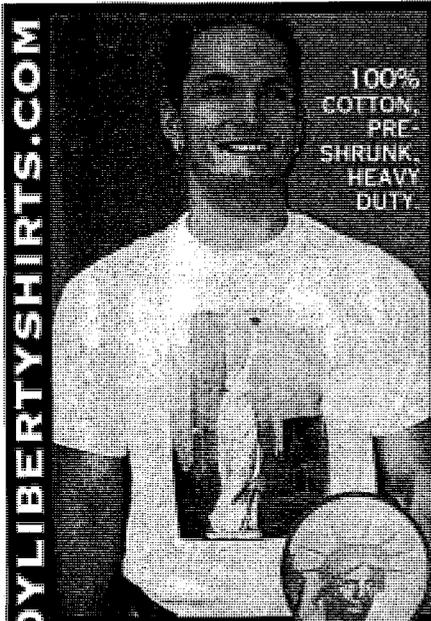
Moore and Slater also blame Rove's evil genius for the decision "to fight the war on terrorism, which was a just cause, and use the pureness of that purpose to advance the Republican political agenda." They start with a smidgen of fact. In June of 2002, a

Moore and Slater's assessments of the power Rove wields in the Bush White House makes them sound like the coke-addled Sherlock Holmes ranting about Professor Moriarty in *The Seven-Percent Solution*.

White House intern lost a computer disk in Lafayette Park. A Democratic Senate aide happened to find it, discovering a PowerPoint presentation by Rove and White House political director Ken Mehlman. Moore and Slater find dark significance in one slide that urged Republicans to "focus on war and the economy." Democrats damned that advice as a Rove effort to "politicize" terrorism. The plain fact is that those *are* the administration's top policy priorities, and would be if Karl Rove had never been born.

Carl Cannon gets the story straight in *Boy Genius*: "In truth, most of the stuff in the presentation, delivered to GOP donors at the posh Hay Adams Hotel, was boilerplate political fare. Still, it

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was embarrassing to misplace your own campaign materials. Hardly the stuff of genius."

But Moore and Slater go even farther: Not only is Rove responsible for a political focus on the war—he was behind the war itself. The failure to catch Osama and crush al Qaeda was threatening Bush's political standing, the argument goes, so the administration redefined the war on terrorism as a global conflict with evil. The war on terror was big enough, they say, but now we would go after any enemy whose destruction could gratify American souls and boost Bush in the polls. "Rove's political strategy for the president transformed a policy whose scope and tenets were unprecedented in American history. All it needed was a little justification. And Iraq was handy."

One of their "sources" on this point is a "political operative who has closely observed Rove's tactics for many years." This person says that Rove and Bush can now take their fight against evil and "apply that to anyone they want. Tom Daschle or Hussein." Another operative calls the Iraq war "the most evil political calculation in American history."

Despite the gravity of their accusation, the authors fail to offer a single scrap of evidence for Rove's masterminding the war. The "Rove-wags-the-dog" scenario does not even make sense on its own terms. Just suppose that Rove did have the power to start a war for its political payoff. When he was allegedly plotting the map to Baghdad, the generals could not guarantee swift victory. There was a small but serious chance that the conflict might drag on and on, leaving Bush and Rove in political body bags.

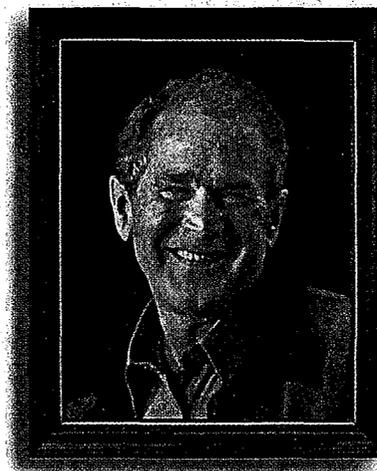
In a cold electoral calculation,

would the probable benefits of victory have outweighed the risks of defeat? Not bloody likely. As an amateur historian, Rove would have known that successful wars are seldom good for the party in power. After World War I, the nation spurned Wilson's Democrats and turned to Warren Harding. In the first midterm election after World War II, Republicans took control of Congress. And the year after the first Bush won the first Gulf War, he lost re-election with the lowest popular-vote share of any incumbent since Taft.

Though they take the theory to loony extremes, Moore and Slater are hardly alone in painting Rove as the real power of the Bush administration. The cover artist of *Boy Genius* illustrates the idea by placing a photo of Bush above the word *Boy* and Rove

above *Genius*. (Lest anyone miss the point, there is also a light bulb over Rove's head.)

Journalists can easily find people who will agree that Rove is Professor Moriarty. In Washington, there are two kinds of politicians with a stake in hyping Rove's influence: Republicans and Democrats. When Republicans disagree with the administration but do not want to criticize their president, they blame Rove. In 2001, for instance, the administration yielded to Hispanic groups that wanted to end Navy bombing tests in Vieques, Puerto Rico. Sen. James M. Inhofe, an Oklahoma Republican who backed the tests, grumbled to *The Washington Post*: "It was Karl Rove who made the decision. It was politically motivated."



BOY

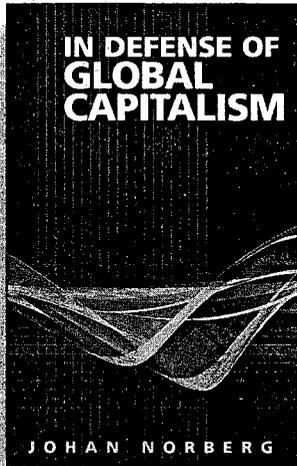


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And when Democrats have to admit that anything intelligent comes out of the Bush administration—headed by a man they dismiss as a grinning, brainless frat boy—they need Rove to take the credit. They simply cannot bring themselves to believe that that dummy Bush could have beaten Ann Richards, Al Gore, and the Taliban. In January, Sen. Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.) addressed House Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) on the Senate floor about economic policy: "I ask my distinguished friend from Tennessee, I know you will see Karl Rove, and I want him

Despite these two biographies and a fair amount of press coverage, Rove remains a mystery—which is a good position for a loyal political aide to be in.

to see he is leading his distinguished president into the same trap that Bush 41 got led into."

It's hard to assess just how much Rove has guided the policies and strategies of the administration, since Bush is running a notably leak-free operation. White House aides and Republican operatives feel a genuine loyalty to the president, so they seldom talk out of turn to the press.

One who did was political scientist John DiIulio, who briefly headed the office of faith-based initiatives. In an e-mail to journalist Ron Suskind, DiIulio said: "Little happens on any issue without Karl's okay, and, often, he supplies such policy substance as the administration puts out. Fortunately, he is not just a largely self-taught, hyper-political guy, but also a very well informed guy when it comes to certain domestic issues. (Whether, as some now assert, he even has such

sway in national security, homeland security, and foreign affairs, I cannot say.)"

The e-mail also suggested that Rove and his fellow "Mayberry Machiavellis" have what DiIulio called a "libertarian" streak. So are they channeling the thoughts of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek into substantive decisions? Alas, neither the e-mail nor Suskind's *Esquire* article was clear on this point, and DiIulio later backed away from his comments. (Policy outcomes have been a mixed bag for libertarians, who may applaud the tax cuts but worry about the enormous power of the Department of Homeland Security.)

Despite these two biographies and a fair amount of press coverage, Rove remains a mystery—which is a good position for a loyal political aide to be in. For a clearer picture of his role, we will have to wait for books that can analyze the Bush administration in retrospect. Will such works depict Rove as a success? The answer will depend on the 2004 election. A Bush defeat would diminish Rove's stature, even if it happens for reasons beyond his control.

Any future analyst of Rove, or of any political aide or consultant, would do well to keep in mind these words from Ecclesiastes: "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all." ■

Contributing Editor John F. Pitney Jr. (jpitney@mckenna.edu) is a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College.

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Professor John J. Pitney, Jr.
Claremont McKenna College
Government Department
850 Columbia Avenue
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