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SALON PREMIUM



Why conservatives must not vote for Bush

A Reaganite argues that Bush is a dangerous, profligate, moralizing radical -- and that his reelection would be catastrophic both for the right and for America.

Editor's Note: Welcome, Doonesbury fans, to Salon! We usually require readers to watch a short ad or join in order to view a complete article, but we thought this story was just too important, so

we're giving you full access without further ado. If you like what you see, we encourage you to join Salon today under our **special 50% off offer**.

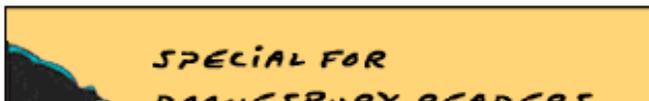
By Doug Bandow



Sept. 10, 2004 | George W. Bush presents conservatives with a fundamental challenge: Do they believe in anything other than power? Are they serious about their rhetoric on limited, constitutionally restrained government?

Bush appears to have remained strong in the presidential race by rallying conservatives behind him. In his convention acceptance speech he derided Sen. John Kerry's claim to represent "conservative values" and seized the mantle of promoting liberty at home and abroad.

Indeed, many conservatives react like the proverbial vampire at the sight of a cross when they consider casting a ballot for Kerry. Tom Nugent, a National Review Online contributing editor, wrote: "The last thing the Republican party needs is the reckless suggestion that conservatives vote Democratic." That is mild, however, compared with the American Conservative Union's mass e-mail solicitation headlined "Why Do Terrorists Want Kerry to Win?"



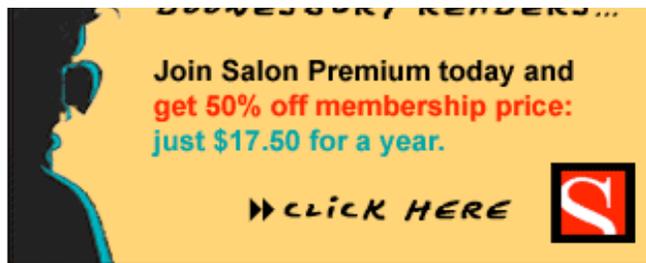
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Republican partisans have little choice but to focus on Kerry's perceived vulnerabilities. A few high-octane speeches cannot disguise the catastrophic failure of the Bush administration in both its domestic and its foreign policies. Mounting deficits are likely to force eventual tax increases, reversing perhaps President Bush's most important economic legacy. The administration's foreign policy is an even greater shambles, with Iraq aflame and America increasingly reviled by friend and foe alike.

Quite simply, the president, despite his well-choreographed posturing, does not represent traditional conservatism -- a commitment to individual liberty, limited government, constitutional restraint and fiscal responsibility. Rather, Bush routinely puts power before principle. As Chris Vance, chairman of Washington state's Republican Party, told the Economist: "George Bush's record is not that conservative ... There's something there for everyone."

Even Bush's conservative sycophants have trouble finding policies to praise. Certainly it cannot be federal spending. In 2000 candidate Bush complained that Al Gore would "throw the budget out of balance." But the big-spending Bush administration and GOP Congress have turned a 10-year budget surplus once estimated at \$5.6 trillion into an estimated \$5 trillion flood of red ink. This year's deficit will run about \$445 billion, according to the Office of Management and Budget.

Brian Riedl of the Heritage Foundation reports that in 2003 "government spending exceeded \$20,000 per household for the first time since World War II." There are few programs at which the president has not thrown money; he has supported massive farm subsidies, an expensive new Medicare drug benefit, thousands of pork barrel projects, dubious homeland security grants, an expansion of Bill Clinton's [AmeriCorps](#), and new foreign aid programs. What's more, says former conservative Republican Rep. Bob Barr, "in the midst of the war on terror and \$500 billion deficits, [Bush] proposes sending spaceships to Mars."

Unfortunately, even the official spending numbers understate the problem. The Bush administration is pushing military proposals that may understate defense costs by \$500 billion over the coming decade. The administration [lied](#) about the likely cost of the Medicare drug benefit, which added \$8 trillion in unfunded liabilities. Moreover, it declined to include in budget proposals any numbers for maintaining the occupation of Iraq or underwriting the war on terrorism. Those funds will come through supplemental appropriation bills. Never mind that Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz had promised that reconstruction of Iraq could be paid for with Iraqi resources. (Yet, despite the Bush administration's generosity, it could not find the money to expeditiously equip U.S. soldiers in Iraq with body armor.)

Nor would a [second Bush term](#) likely be different. Nothing in his convention speech

suggested a new willingness by Bush to make tough choices. Indeed, when discussing their domestic agenda, administration officials complained that the media had ignored their proposals, such as \$250 million in aid to community colleges for job training. Not mentioned was that Washington runs a plethora of job training programs, few of which have demonstrated lasting benefits. This is the hallmark of a limited-government conservative?

Jonah Goldberg, a regular contributor to NRO, one of Bush's strongest bastions, complains that the president has "asked for a major new commitment by the federal government to insert itself into everything from religious charities to marriage counseling." Indeed, Bush seems to aspire to be America's moralizer in chief. He would use the federal government to micromanage education, combat the scourge of steroid use, push drug testing of high school kids, encourage character education, promote marriage, hire mentors for children of prisoners and provide coaches for ex-cons.

Conservative pundit Andrew Sullivan worries that Bush "is fusing Big Government liberalism with religious right moralism. It's the nanny state with more cash."

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