

A review of George W. Bush's *Decision Points*

In March of 2009—and in his first post-presidential speech—George W. Bush gave a preview of the book that would become *Decision Points*. “I’m going to put people in my place,” Bush told a group of Canadian businessmen, “so when the history of this administration is written at least there’s an authoritarian [sic] voice saying exactly what happened.” It was the latest in a long line of Bush malapropisms—and another data point for those who considered him a presidential dunce.

That’s one question hanging over this book. Bush himself took to joking that people would be surprised he could “write a book, much less read one.” In a sense, though, Bush’s writing—which is quite good for this kind of book—doesn’t even matter. Presidential memoirs are not read so much as discussed. You already know *Decision Points*’ juiciest details—Barbara Bush showing Bush her miscarried fetus; Bush considering dropping Dick Cheney from his 2004 ticket—just like you knew well before the publication of Bill Clinton’s *My Life* that it disclosed how, post-Monica, Clinton had to sleep on the couch. But do you remember the couch? Did you even read Clinton’s book? Or, to pose a second question: Has Bush written a book that’s worth *reading*—a book that transcends its own relentless media hype?

In 477 pages, or about half as many as *My Life*, *Decision Points* explores 14 key decisions from Bush’s life and presidency. In an online “book trailer,” Bush calls this an “untraditional approach.” But that’s not quite right. The first two chapters—on Bush’s decisions to quit drinking and to run for president—still cover the autobiographical basics: idyllic childhood, inspiring high school teacher, chance encounter with a future president, and so on. Instead, let’s call it a mildly frustrating approach. The chapter on personnel decisions contains some of Bush’s best tidbits, but it feels disorienting when an obscure figure gets fired, only to pop up in a later chapter.

This approach also means Bush’s best and most important chapter, on 9/11, doesn’t start until page 126. Bush’s description of the day itself—a full 14 pages—provides both a reminder of our shared terror and a glimpse of Bush’s unique perspective. As he boards Air Force One, Bush sees two shaken flight attendants and realizes they stand as a microcosm of the entire country. But there’s no time to dwell on this or other mini-epiphanies—Bush must worry about the safety of his wife or the potential threat of every temporarily unresponsive plane.

After 9/11, as Bush points out with some frequency, he became a war-time president. And it is on this count that *Decision Points* tries hardest, as Bush promised, to put readers in his place. In his first author interview, Matt Lauer pressed Bush on his authorization of waterboarding. “Would it be okay for a foreign country to waterboard an American citizen?” Lauer asked. “All I ask,” Bush replied, “is that people read the book.” In the book, as in the interview, Bush remains firm on his decision. But the book surrounds it with, among other things, a short anecdote about meeting Daniel Pearl’s wife; a description of the country’s constant level of fear (for the next two years, Bush reviewed “an average of 400 specific threats each month”); a discussion of how Guantanamo Bay wasn’t that bad and included a library that stocked the Arabic translation of *Harry Potter*; an account of Ground Zero clean-up crews calling out for revenge; and much, much more.

Context is one thing books do better than TV. Another is airing both sides of a debate. But *Decision Points* takes advantage of this second opportunity much less often. In his chapter on stem cell research, Bush details both the pressure he felt (from scientists, from the Pope) and the process he used—weighing both sides and reaching a final, if still conflicted, decision. It won't surprise anyone that Bush makes most of his decisions less deliberately. And this means Bush is willing to include some moments of admirable candor. "I was stunned," he remembers of hearing that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. "That plane must have had the worst pilot in the world."

Two goals lurk behind every presidential memoir: turning a profit and shaping one's reputation. After Thomas Jefferson's family published his fragmentary memoir—they needed the money—John Quincy Adams complained that "Jefferson, by his own narrative, is always in the right." We expect nothing less from Clinton and Bush, which means *Decision Points*' slanted presentation should not prevent it from being widely read.

What will, though, is the book's tone. More than most presidential memoirs—more even than the TV interviews Bush has been doing to promote it—*Decision Points* puts its author's persona on display. Bush peppers his prose with colloquialisms like "uh-oh" and "No kidding." He not only loves to tell jokes, he loves to tell about the times he told jokes. In fact, your reaction to his "authoritarian" slip will provide a good index to your ability to enjoy and learn from this book. Was the flub inconsequential or indicative? Is Bush's prose hokey and unserious or, now that there are no more voters to pander, refreshingly authentic? "Whatever the verdict on my presidency," Bush writes at the end of his book, "I'm comfortable with the fact that I won't be around to hear it." Bush is right: history will take decades to decide on his legacy. It will take nearly as long for many readers to bring themselves to read this book.