

“Dubya” and “Dutch” —Another Win for the Gipper

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There's one candidate who didn't worry about recounts over close elections. That was Ronald Reagan. He was elected by landslides twice as California governor, the first coming against a popular incumbent. He crushed his opponents in the 1980 and 1984 presidential races. In 1980, he swamped Jimmy Carter in electoral votes, 489 to 49. His 1984 trouncing of Walter Mondale was even more pronounced, 525 to 13, carrying 49 states. Mondale took only his home state of Minnesota by a mere 3,000 votes.

“Dutch” Reagan left office with the highest approval rating in the post-WWII period. Praise has come not just from the general public. The most recent survey of presidential scholars ranked him the eighth best president in U.S. history.

And, yet now, chalk up another victory for the Gipper.

It was Reagan who ultimately won the election for George W. Bush on December 12, 2000 (the day the U.S. Supreme Court settled the election), almost twelve years after the end of his presidency and six years after his hand-written November 5, 1994 letter informing us—with characteristic, unflagging optimism—that Alzheimer's was inexorably riding him into the sunset of his life.

He clinched it in part, indeed most directly, via his U.S. Supreme Court picks. Of the seven who voted seven to two that the Florida Supreme Court acted unconstitutionally, all but two were appointed by Reagan or his successor, George H. W. Bush, who got the presidency by virtue of the triumphant fact he was Reagan's vice president. Of the five who killed the Florida recount by a 5 to 4 vote—sealing the presidency for Bush—three were appointed by Reagan, one by Reagan's successor, and one (a Nixon appointee) promoted to Chief Justice by Reagan. That chief justice, William Rehnquist, wrote the majority decision. The sharp, intellectual linchpin of the majority, Antonin Scalia, was a Reagan appointee.

Those five justices were there because of a twelve-year run in Republican presidential leadership created by Reagan, compared to eight years of White House control by Democrats. That 12 to 8 advantage produced the slim 5 to 4 advantage, either by ideology or partisanship. It is more than ironic that conservatives and liberals alike have known all along that this election was about court appointees. The winner will shift the federal court system, including the Supreme

Court, in either a liberal or conservative direction. How ironic, then, that the court itself resolved this election.

By the way, Democrats like hatchet man Mario Cuomo should cool it in making a big deal about Gore winning the popular vote. He won the popular count by a couple hundred thousand votes out of 100 million cast. While that's more than Bush's total, it's not especially decisive. Bush supporters might counter by noting that Bush won far more states than Gore, probably 31 to 18. Bush crushed Gore among counties, taking some 2,400 out of 3,100. A President Gore could've literally hopped on Air Force One in Washington and traveled all the way to the Pacific without ever flying over a county he won. All that matters is who won the Electoral College.

But there are broader ways in which Reagan helped win this for George W.

Critically, it was Reagan who rescued and popularized conservatism, giving it a sunny face and legitimacy after the near-fatal Goldwater defeat in 1964.

Most notably, he realigned the political map in a way not done since F.D.R. shook it up. The south became not just conservative but conservative Republican. It became Reagan country. By 2000, it was naturally Bush country. It was Republican-Reagan-Bush country to such an extent that Democrat Al Gore couldn't even take Arkansas (Clinton's home state) and Tennessee, his own home state. Even Mondale had won his own home state. Bush won the electoral college because he swept the south.

Recall election night. Republicans sweated Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and other battleground states. But they confidently watched as each southern state, one after the other, easily fell into the Bush camp, a few crucial electoral votes at a time.

How did Bush ride this conservative wave? He successfully painted Gore as a “big-government liberal”—the antithesis of a conservative and the tag all Democrats since Michael Dukakis have avoided like the plague. Only Clinton escaped it, getting in on the strength of a 1991 recession and carefully crafted image as a “New Democrat”—meaning a moderate, non-liberal Democrat. Gore tried to be a New Democrat, too, but George W. smartly wouldn't allow him.

It's fascinating: The president George W. holds most dear to his heart is the president who was his father—his hero. However, he has chosen to emulate the conservatism of Reagan rather than the political philosophy of his father.

Moreover, while Bush carries Reagan's political philosophy, he also summons the message and image. He talks of American renewal, hope, unity, inspiration, exhibiting a strong personal optimism. He employed uplifting Reaganesque language when in Green Bay the day before the election, speaking of his “inherent trust in the American people,” the “promise of America,” and the “need to lift American spirits.”

It's worth pausing here to note a few other Bush-Reagan analogies.

Each were two-term, highly popular governors of the nation's two largest states. Each were elected in their states by landslides, including first-term victories against popular Democrat incumbent governors.

Each man hates taxes and vows to cut them. Neither shirks in their defense of unborn children. Abortion is wrong, and they say so without fear of criticism, including from pro-choice and “moderate” Republicans who insist they soften their pro-life stance. These two would or will not compromise on that issue, even daring to include a statement in support of babies in the womb in their acceptance speeches.

Back in August, columnist Robert Novak rightly noted that Bush himself has suggested that (in Novak’s words)

. . . he is the first Republican candidate since Ronald Reagan who can take bold conservative positions without terrifying America. If he is correct, he’ll win.

He was correct, and he did win.

The GOP rallied around both men, energized in a way the party hadn’t seen in years.

There are similarities in their management styles. Both are delegators who leave the details to others. All the while, they are “theme” or “big picture” guys who possess principles. The ideas they champion come from the heart, not polls or focus groups.

Both men have a “cowboy” image, aided not only by West/mid-West roots but the fact that both retreat to their ranch havens. Reagan spent a full-year’s worth of time at the Reagan Ranch during his presidency. Bush will likewise head for the ranch when he wants to escape Washington. Coincidentally, these are great photo ops for the president, replete with that uniquely American image of the president as a rugged individualist, “real-guy,” cowboy-like figure. Some may find this silly, but it’s notable. For whatever reason, I believe many Americans, and (for sure) many more foreigners, find this image appealing. Aside from whether the image helps popularity in any way, I stick to my point that it’s at least a semi-interesting analogy between the two men.

Also, both have a deep faith in God. For each, their relationship with God was a focal point in their lives. Reagan’s belief system was embedded during his childhood, ingrained by his mother. Bush seems to have been “born again” much later as an adult, with an indelible impact. He says he quit drinking in 1986 because “I heard a higher calling.” Few to none have picked up this similarity, which perhaps I caught only because I’m writing a book on Reagan: While candidate Bush was criticized for making the very politically incorrect assertion that his hero is Jesus Christ, candidate Reagan did as well.

Like Reagan, also, he is secure and confident, which means he, too, could care less when elites dismiss him as a dummy. He thus also will shrug off the drivel that he succeeds because of the “smart men” around him. Both Bush and Reagan are self-deprecating about this. They’re so personally secure and confident that not only will they not be bothered by attacks on their intelligence, they’ll actually join in on the fun. They probably both realize that the political left, which includes the media and academe, nearly always call conservatives stupid. Not much you can do

about it. Sure, Bush says, we all know I had higher SATs and better grades than Gore, but the media will happily ignore that. What else is new? And, again, who cares anyway?

Besides, Bush, like Reagan, likes people and they like him. His likability ratings are extremely high, including among those who didn't vote for him. From the outset, people liked Bush to a shocking degree, even before they knew where he stood on issues. Both he and Reagan have charming personalities that take them far. As long as Bush isn't rolled by a recession, the American public will like him a lot, as Texans did. Noticing a few of these shared traits, long before Bush got the Republican nomination, Reagan Secretary of State George Shultz, one not given to hyperbole, said simply: “He's like Reagan. He's got it.”

There are differences. Bush lacks Reagan's incredible communications skills. But so does everyone. He also seems to lack the vision, although Reagan had a Cold War and a century-long struggle against Communism to forge a meaningful vision around. Bush luckily doesn't, thanks in large part to what Reagan did to kill the Soviet Union.

Still, there are more similarities than differences. Back to my initial point on Reagan ultimately deciding this election for Bush.

While Reagan didn't give Bush some crucial intangibles, many of which were key to his presidential victory, he did hand him a dominant, winnable conservatism, and a devoutly Republican south. And, oh yes, those U.S. Supreme Court picks didn't hurt. These were critical to Bush winning the 2000 presidential race.

I don't know if Mr. Reagan followed this awful election. Ironically, by coincidence, in doing research on my book on Reagan, I happened to talk to someone from his California office on the morning of December 12. This person, who sees him weekly, assured me he is “well.” I was told he spends a lot of time watching television. If so, maybe he has been watching this mess. If so, one might wish he could grasp yet another of his presidential victories. Ω