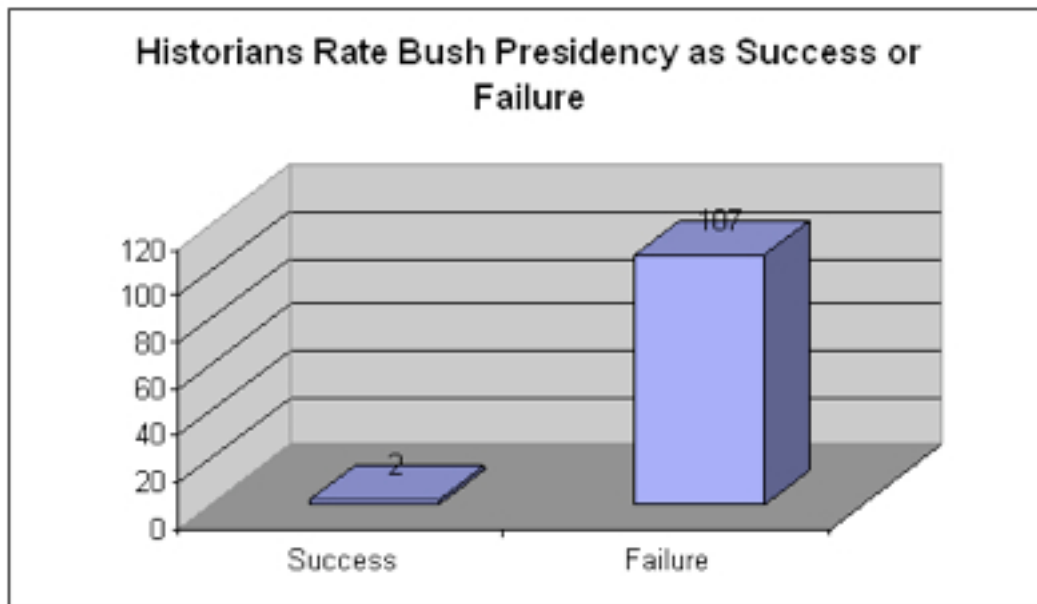


## The Bush Presidency: Merely Horrible, or the Worst Ever?

*It is a time for looking forward, but it is also a time for looking back.*

*A few months ago, the [History Channel conducted in "informal survey" of 109 Historians](#), who were asked to rate the Bush Presidency. An astounding 1.8 % replied that his presidency was a success, as is illustrated by this handy graph.*



*I believe these figure yield a grand total of 2 historians who rated Bush a success. A full 61% rated him as the worst president ever, with a whole bunch more allowing that while it's perhaps too early to tell, he's definitely in the running.*

*I'm sure all of us left wing blogger types are going to miss Bush, in a strange sort of way. We won't, as Nixon once said, have George to kick around anymore. It was so easy. But we must be brave and soldier on. After all, while he was a fun target, he was also wreaking historic destruction here and beyond our borders.*

*But before I let him go, I'm going to put my amateur historian's oar in the water and make the best case I can for awarding Bush the palm as worst president ever. This post will be far longer than usual, but this is a subject of historic scope. I realize that almost no one will want to plow through this, but that's okay. It's cathartic.*

*So, let us proceed.*

## *First, a Brief Look at the Competition*

*There have been a lot of bad presidents in the history of this country. If truth be told, most of our Presidents have been mediocre at best. However, I think there's general agreement that we had a stretch of truly wretched presidents just before Lincoln (Fillmore, Pierce and Buchanan). Harding is everyone's whipping boy, and a lot of folks like to add Grant into the mix. We veterans of the 60s are tempted to add Nixon, but that would be unfair. This is a list of the worst presidents, not the most evil presidents, and Nixon just doesn't measure down to the above mentioned folks in terms of sheer incompetence in the office. So I think we can safely say that the folks I've mentioned constitute Bush's competition. Is there really any contest?*

*I submit that there is a rather simple test for judging the worst, when it comes to Presidents. Merely ask yourself: which President did the most damage? Now, there are a host of things you can look at in making this assessment, so the simple question can become quite complex. So let's try to break it down. Here are just some of the things that a president can damage:*

- ☹️Our Constitutional system of checks and balances. This is a fragile thing. Once damaged, it is often impossible to restore.*
- ☹️Beyond the system of checks and balances, our basic democratic institutions.*
- ☹️The integrity of the government, i.e., corruption.*
- ☹️The constitutional rights of our citizens.*
- ☹️The economic well being of our citizens*
- ☹️Relations between and among the nations of the world.*
- ☹️The well being of individuals living in other countries.*
- ☹️The environment.*

*Now, you will note that none of the aforesaid Presidents had much opportunity to damage most of these things, and few of them even tried to damage them all. Moreover, I would argue, not a one of them came close to matching George Bush in any one of these areas. The pre-Civil War presidents were bad because they were weak presidents, who failed, particularly in the rear view mirror of history, to do what was needed to avoid the arguably inevitable Civil War. Sure they caused damage, but almost entirely*

*in a negative way. (In their defense, they governed in a time of weak presidents: Congress wielded power in those days.) Bush, on the other hand, actively sought out things he could ruin, and proceeded to do so. It was only when his own incompetence got in the way that he failed to wreak maximum damage.*

*Personally, I'm not sure Harding even belongs in the pack. Sure he was a lousy president, but his reputation for being truly awful rests almost entirely on the [Teapot Dome Scandal](#) and assorted other corruptions. But in hindsight we can see the Teapot Dome affair for what it is—a mere blip, corruption so insignificant that during the Bush years it would hardly make the Evening News, and if it did, it would have been forgotten within days.*

*To get back to a point to which I briefly alluded, Bush is the first truly horrible president (he makes even Reagan look good) to have governed while the United States was the most powerful country on earth. His opportunity to wreak destruction was orders of magnitude greater than Millard Fillmore's, or even Warren Harding. These factors gave him a head start on his rivals, and he took full advantage of them.*

*So, Return with me now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. Let's look at the Bush record. I should emphasize that this is just a smattering, culled from the computer "notebooks" I've been keeping over the past five years. This selection will be somewhat arbitrary and idiosyncratic. This task really deserves a book and certainly more time than the odd hours I've managed to set aside in the last few days. So rest assured that for every example I've given there are several I've left out, and for each of those there are scores I just can't remember. The examples I give should be considered nothing more than that, exemplars of the systemic rot that permeated this Administration*

*Also, I'm going to take several things as read. First, that the Bush Administration has ruined the economy, by a combination of horrible policy, anti-regulatory fever, corruption, and astonishing incompetence. Second, that Bush lied us into the Iraq War and then managed the occupation with a combination of horrible policy, corruption and astonishing incompetence. So I won't be shooting those barreled fish (or Katrina either), except to note here that both have done untold damage to this country and to its standing in the world. When they come up again, it will be to illustrate other points.*

*A president's primary obligation is to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution. Let's see how well that went.*

*George Bush has been quoted as saying the Constitution "is just a god-damned piece of paper". [The quote may be apocryphal](#) but there's a reason the story was widely believed. It is hard to make a case that any president has launched such a sustained assault on the Constitution. No part of that tattered document has gone undamaged, from the separation of powers to the Bill of Rights.*

*The President takes an oath when entering into his office. An oath was considered a sacred thing once upon a time. The Greek Gods were bound by oaths, even when they were wrung from them by force. The framers were men for whom honor was important. Oaths were sacred. Here's the oath that George Bush took. It's from the constitution:*

***"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."***

*The fact is that the constitution confers very little power on the President. Here's the meat of what it says:*

***The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States; he may require the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments, upon any subject relating to the Duties of their respective Offices, and he shall have Power to Grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offenses against the United States, except in Cases of [Impeachment](#).***

***He shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two thirds of the Senators present [concur](#); and he shall nominate, and by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, shall appoint Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls, Judges of the supreme Court, and all other Officers of the United States, whose Appointments are not herein otherwise provided for, and which shall be established by Law: but the Congress may by Law vest the Appointment of such inferior Officers, as they think proper, in the President alone, in the Courts of Law, or in the Heads of Departments.***

***The President shall have Power to fill up all Vacancies that may happen during the Recess of the Senate, by granting Commissions which shall expire at the End of their next Session.***

...

**He shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient; he may, on extraordinary Occasions, convene both Houses, or either of them, and in Case of Disagreement between them, with Respect to the Time of [Adjournment](#), he may [adjourn](#) them to such Time as he shall think proper; he shall receive Ambassadors and other public Ministers; he shall take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed, and shall Commission all the Officers of the United States. (Emphasis added)**

*There's not really much there. The most important duty the President has is to faithfully execute the laws. We all know where Bush stood on that.*

*The Bush Administration has whole heartedly embraced a theory of presidential power wholly at odds with our history and the constitution. The impartial observer can only stand amazed when one considers that this theory comes from people who claim to want to interpret the Constitution by looking to the original intent of the framers. It's the unitary executive theory, a would be dictator's wet dream, and a theory its adherents will now abandon, since a Democrat will soon be president. [This is as good a summary of this "theory" as any:](#)*

***The theory holds that because the Constitution vests the executive (law-executing) power in the president, he gets to delegate it to other executive branch officials as he sees fit. Thus, Congress cannot vest independent decision-making authority about how to execute anti-pollution laws in a subordinate official like the head of the EPA; such a law is unconstitutional and the president is free to ignore it and override the official's decision.***

***The Unitary Executive Theory, which was an invention of the Meese Justice Department during the Reagan administration, is controversial because the Constitution also explicitly empowers Congress to make rules and regulations for how the executive branch carries out its work. There are also several [Supreme Court precedents](#) that are incompatible with the theory. Nevertheless, the Bush administration has embraced the theory, especially in forums where it is very difficult to challenge what the executive branch has done in court.***

*The theory provides a veneer of theoretical respectability for illegal and sometimes criminal behavior. It represents an unconstitutional power grab of the first order. At heart our system depends on the actors within it voluntarily staying within certain limits, both*

*implicit and explicit. The Bush Administration has known no limits. The fact that it was enabled by a compliant Congress is no excuse for its actions, even if it may have been, at least at first, a necessary precondition.*

*This theory, or something like it, underpinned Bush's abuse of signing statements. Bush utilized signing statements in an unprecedented fashion, using them as conditional vetoes, reserving to himself the right to ignore (read "break") the law when he saw fit. For instance, at the same time that he signed a law banning torture, [he reserved the right to torture whenever he saw fit](#). As Charlie Savage reported in the [Boston Globe](#):*

***President Bush has quietly claimed the authority to disobey more than 750 laws enacted since he took office, asserting that he has the power to set aside any statute passed by Congress when it conflicts with his interpretation of the Constitution.***

***Among the laws Bush said he can ignore are military rules and regulations, affirmative-action provisions, requirements that Congress be told about immigration services problems, "whistle-blower" protections for nuclear regulatory officials, and safeguards against political interference in federally funded research.***

***Legal scholars say the scope and aggression of Bush's assertions that he can bypass laws represent a concerted effort to expand his power at the expense of Congress, upsetting the balance between the branches of government. The Constitution is clear in assigning to Congress the power to write the laws and to the president a duty "to take care that the laws be faithfully executed." Bush, however, has repeatedly declared that he does not need to "execute" a law he believes is unconstitutional.***

*You can't shred the Constitution without a compliant Department of Justice. Bush and his cohorts made sure that the Justice Department would be no obstacle to their lawlessness.*

*When the final history of the Bush Administration is written, we will probably learn that the politicization of the Department of Justice began before Bush's first inauguration. It was in full swing by 2005, when [career lawyers were told that the department was so not interested in their views](#) on voting rights cases that they were forbidden to weigh in on those cases. Hiring decisions were made based on the content of a person's politics, rather than that of their brain. Suddenly, [it became an advantage to be a graduate of one of the worst law schools in the country](#). Having stolen the 2000 election, they wanted to make sure they could do it again, so they tried to gin up fake voting fraud cases. When eight U.S. Attorneys refused to go along (we don't know how many chose*

to knuckle under), they were fired. As one of its final acts the Administration announced that its own investigation into the architect of its assault on minority voting rights, Bradley Schlozman, [lied to Congress about his role in the perversion of the Justice Department](#). The Administration announced that it had no intention of prosecuting him for this criminal act. Meanwhile, it proceeds full speed ahead on the apparently far more important question of whether Roger Clemens lied to Congress about his steroid use.

Never shy about trying to compound its criminal behavior, [the Bush Administration took advantage of the situation](#) in order to assert that it had the authority to order the US Attorney not to enforce subpoenas issued by Congress in order to force the participants in this criminal enterprise to testify before Congress.

Meanwhile, despite all the evidence to the contrary, [there was a virtual epidemic of corrupt Democrats out there](#):

**From 2001 through 2006 the Bush Justice Department investigated elected Democratic office holders and office seekers locally (non-state-wide and non federal offices) at a rate more than seven times greater (nearly 85% to 12 %) than they investigated local Republican elected office holders and seekers. This was so even though, throughout the nation, Democrat elected officials outnumber Republican elected officials at the rate of only 50% to 41%. Nine percent of elected officials are Independent/Other.**

The criminality goes on. Bush engaged in blatant coverups, for which he was never held to account. For instance, In 2006 the Justice Department ethics department was tasked with investigating the process that led to the authorization of illegal wiretapping at the NSA. The department dropped the investigation when [Bush personally ordered](#) that the investigators be denied the security clearances necessary to conduct the investigation.

[Bush admitted that he broke the law and authorized warrantless wiretapping](#). There was no legal basis for this act. It was both criminal and unconstitutional. He confessed to an impeachable and criminal offense. Congress yawned. Another gaping hole in the Constitution.

In addition to mounting a frontal assault on the Constitution, The Bush Administration engaged in a host of illegal acts that constituted threats to our freedoms.

It's a pretty fair bet that Millard Fillmore didn't use the government to disseminate propaganda, but Bush did. [Pre-packaged fake news reports, pundits on the take and retired generals posing as independent network analysts while they were actually Bush propaganda recruits](#). It's illegal for the U.S. government to propagandize, but that's a legal quibble, and anyway the law only applies to Bush when he wants it to, which is never.

*Bush is a religious guy. We know he is, because he tells us so and because he talks to God. Even more frightening, he thinks God talks back. Since Bush has this inside pipeline, he sees no reason why he should not impose his religious views on the rest of us, First Amendment be damned.*

*Bush funneled money to fundamentalist organizations who used it to proselytize in prisons, where inmates who "converted" were granted special privileges.*

*In Kentucky, a radio station, fearing the wrath of the Bush Administration and the religious right, took Garrison Keillor off the air because he read two poems with the word "breast " and one with the phrase "get high".*

*As Garry Wills, himself a religious, but not a crazy man, pointed out:*

***Bush promised his evangelical followers faith-based social services, which he called "compassionate conservatism." He went beyond that to give them a faith-based war, faith-based law enforcement, faith-based education, faith-based medicine, and faith-based science. He could deliver on his promises because he stocked the agencies handling all these problems, in large degree, with born-again Christians of his own variety. The evangelicals had complained for years that they were not able to affect policy because liberals left over from previous administrations were in all the health and education and social service bureaus, at the operational level. They had specific people they objected to, and they had specific people with whom to replace them, and Karl Rove helped them do just that.***

*No pandering was too much. The National Park Service, under pressure from on high, approved the sale of a book, at the Grand Canyon Visitor's Center, entitled Grand Canyon: A Different View, which peddled the scientifically absurd notion that the seventeen million year old canyon is only three thousand years old. To add salt to the wound, the National Park service was not permitted to give an official estimate of the geologic age of its principal feature, due to pressure from Bush administration appointees*

*In perhaps the most cynical public act in American History, and that's going some, Congress, urged on by Bush, passed a law designed to apply on only one person, interfering in the private decision of a husband, and the final decision of a host of courts, in order to cater to the religious right . The country collectively gagged at the sight of Congress and the President ganging up on a single individual to force him to keep his brain dead wife "alive". It was the beginning of the end for Bush's popularity. Terri Schiavo gave her life for a worthy cause.*

*Bush has made much of his alleged success in combating AIDS in Africa. But in fact he wreaked destruction on that ravaged continent by imposing conditions on the aid he provided, conditions inspired by his fundamentalist base. He restricted access to con-*



doms, relied on the promotion of abstinence as a preventative, tool, and barred AIDS recipients from working with prostitutes to try to reduce the incidence of AIDS, and [diverted funds from effective AIDS prevention organizations to religious groups that promoted abstinence only programs that have been proven ineffective both here and abroad.](#)

It wasn't just religion of course. The events of September 11th gave Bush the perfect opportunity to institute a police state, and he jumped at the chance. The Bush Administration took advantage of post -9/11 hysteria to push the "Patriot Act" (Hail, George Orwell) through a compliant Congress. Among other things, it provided that the [FBI could issue a "security letter" to libraries](#), forcing libraries to divulge records of their patrons reading and internet habits and further forcing those librarians to keep quiet about the FBI's demands. Over 30,000 so called "security letters" were issued by 2005.

Political success was all in all to the Bush cabal. One of their slimier tactics involved the time dishonored American tradition of stirring up hate against the "other". Terrorists were only useful to a certain extent, homegrown "others" were necessary. Since outright appeals to racism have become taboo, and are working less and less in any event, Rove, Bush, et. al went after the gays. Promoting anti-gay initiatives in states like Ohio was an effective way to turn out the haters, who would, from their point of view, incidentally also vote for Bush. It must be conceded that others have trodden this ground before. In fact, the modern Republican party was built on the exploitation of racism, and it maintained its success, until its recent crash, by turning Americans against each other. Nor is this political tactic peculiar to the modern Republican party. So, I must admit that Bush did not exceed all of his predecessors in the use of these tactics. He did equal them, however, so this adds to his claim to the mantle of the worst president ever.

Besides the overt war against the gays, Bush engaged in a semi-covert war against the rest of us.

In the perverted world of BushSpeak, the term "class warfare" refers to any perceived attack on the privileges of the rich. To a large extent, just accusing someone of engaging in class warfare is enough to delegitimize their arguments, facts be damned. But of course, the reality was that there was a class war going on during the Bush Administration—a relentless war by the top .1% against the rest of us. The lower a person happens to be in the economic scale the more fevered the attack. The economic policy of the Administration has consisted of engineering massive transfers of wealth up the economic ladder. The tax cuts are only the most obvious example. Buried in every budget were gifts for the rich, and misery for the poor. [Paul Krugman gives an example in 2005](#)

**First, the facts: the budget proposal really does take food from the mouths of babes. One of the proposed spending cuts would make it harder for working families with children to receive food stamps, terminating aid for about 300,000 people. Another would deny child care assistance to about 300,000 children, again in low-income working families.**

**And the budget really does shower largesse on millionaires even as it punishes the needy. For example, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities informs us that even as the administration demands spending cuts, it will proceed with the phaseout of two little-known tax provisions - originally put in place under the first President George Bush - that limit deductions and exemptions for high-income households.**

**More than half of the benefits from this backdoor tax cut would go to people with incomes of more than a million dollars; 97 percent would go to people with incomes exceeding \$200,000.**

**It so happens that the number of taxpayers with more than \$1 million in annual income is about the same as the number of people who would have their food stamps cut off under the Bush proposal. But it costs a lot more to give a millionaire a break than to put food on a low-income family's table: eliminating limits on deductions and exemptions would give taxpayers with incomes over \$1 million an average tax cut of more than \$19,000.**

*Besides the War against gays, and the war against the middle class, Bush engaged in a war on Reason itself.*

*The Bush Administration overtly pushed to institute a system of "faith based science" in the federal government. Not just science that conformed to the dictates of fundamentalist Christians, but science that conformed to the dictates of Republican ideology and that of the Republican party's corporate sponsors. A Bush appointee at NASA decreed that each mention of the Big Bang on NASA's website had to be accompanied by the word "theory", and that same agency [tried to silence its top climate scientist when he failed to toe the corporate line on global warming.](#)*

*Just as they worked hard to sell out the Constitution, the middle class, and rational thinking, they worked hard to set a new standard for political corruption.*

*The government has been for sale cheap, from first to last, from Halliburton to the bail-out. This is so widely acknowledged, it, as we lawyers sometimes say, needs no citation. In this administration, corruption measured in the tens of thousands of dollars is not worth mentioning, the 10s of millions represents amateur efforts. The real action is with the folks who are getting tens of billions of dollars, with no accountability asked or received. This has been so to the waning days of the Administration. In this morning's Times we re-learn what we already knew. The Bush Administration gave away \$350 Billion Dollars of our money without setting any conditions on the use of the money. ([Bail-out Is a Windfall to Banks, if Not to Borrowers](#))*

*All of this corruption does not come cheap. Bush entered the White House with a budget surplus, which he immediately gave away to the rich via tax cuts. He then accumulated a massive deficit through a combination of those tax cuts, needless war, and profligate spending (e.g., a massive give away to drug companies masquerading as a drug benefit for the elderly). There's nothing wrong with deficit spending if you invest the money in something worthwhile, but Bush's spending was akin to borrowing money to*

*flush it down the toilet. We are now entering a Depression, for which deficit spending is the only solution. But we have been weakened by all that borrowing in the "good" times. As an added bonus, our major creditors are our major competitors. China is now in a position to wield enormous influence over our internal affairs, because owe that country massive amounts of money, and are going to need to borrow massive amounts more in order to finance our recovery from the Bush years.*

*If the Bush Administration has been busy at home, it's been even busier abroad, wreaking havoc and destroying this country's reputation.*

*The Bush Administration was the first in American History to overtly adopt a "shoot first, talk later (if ever)" mentality toward foreign policy. It exhibited an absolute contempt toward diplomacy. It treated our allies with similar contempt. Its use of torture and concentration camps has, along with its obvious disdain for the opinions of mankind, destroyed the reputation of the United States.*

*Bush, marching to the tune of the neocons, had every intention of establishing a client state in Iraq and extending the Empire into Iran. Even after political support for such a move declined to almost zero, it was an open question whether he would start a war against Iran as his final gift to the American people.*

*Bush has laid the foundation for the loss of civilian control over the military by the use of mercenaries in Iraq. [There are more mercenaries in Iraq than soldiers.](#) These soldiers of fortune, a profession normally consisting of the scum of the earth, were given blanket immunity from prosecution for any crimes they committed in Iraq, and, as anyone would expect, they proceeded to commit all kinds of crime. The use of mercenaries is inconsistent with the maintenance of a Republic and virtually a necessary precondition to the creation of an empire. Empire, in turn, is inconsistent with free institutions.*

*Bush's criminality has not gone unnoticed in the rest of the world, and the international community has drawn the logical conclusions.*

*In 2006 the Guardian reported that the British people believed that [Bush was more dangerous than Kim Jong-il of Korea.](#) That same article reported that people throughout the world felt that U.S. policy had made the world a more dangerous place. I won't spend much time on torture, since the damage it caused to our international reputation is so obvious it need there is no need to dwell on it. But let me digress to note this tidbit, something even Orwell could not have imagined. Bush's government [took the legal position that the victims of torture should not be allowed to talk about it,](#) claiming that it would endanger national security for them to do so, because they might reveal our methods to future torturees. Perish the thought that they might have been worried about the methods being disclosed to the American people.*

*Finally, we come to what is, in truth, the most important issue of all: the environment.*

*No rational person can deny, in the face of all the evidence, that global warming is the overriding threat facing humanity today. When Iraq, Katrina, widespread corruption and American democracy are all just dim memories, mankind will still look back at this time*

in history as the critical moment, when we either succeeded or failed to avert a global crisis of gigantic proportions.

Bush came into [office promising to lead the fight to limit carbon dioxide emissions](#). As soon as he got into office he backed off of that promise. He [spent the next eight years denying that the problem existed](#), or insisting that it needed more study. The lack of action of the pre-Lincoln presidents will likely seem like nothing compared to Bush's lack of action on this issue. But his legacy will be even more perverse. At least those presidents did not deny that the problem existed. Had Bush at least emphatically admitted that global warming was a real problem, he would have made it harder for the legions of deniers that have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Obama will have to deal with those people, from Fox News to the oil companies, all of whom will have the Bush presidency and the Bush global warming arguments to fall back on for "intellectual" cover.

It goes without saying that global warming is not the only failing of the Bush environmental record. It has often appeared that they go out of their way to wreak environmental destruction. The Bush Administration [never met an endangered species that it didn't want to kill](#), or a wild area it didn't want to develop. Since it had to ignore the clear intent of the law in order to get its way, these were not just policy issues, they were further examples of Bush lawlessness.

True to form, Bush was proud of his record of environmental destruction. Can you imagine any other world leader bidding good-bye to his peers at an environmental summit by saying "[Goodbye from the world's biggest polluter](#)."

I realize that I have merely scratched the surface. I began this post by writing an outline, but I find I just don't have the time to flesh out whole sections of it. It would take a book of mammoth proportions to make the full case against George Bush. But I think it comes down to this: Bush has destroyed everything he has touched, and he has touched just about everything. The Constitution is in tatters. Our republican form of government has been undermined. The rule of law has been rendered a joke. We have been set against one another. We are engaged in an imperial adventure, the only bright spot of which is that we are failing due to Bush's supreme incompetence. We have been robbed blind by the most corrupt administration in American history. The economy is destroyed. The environment is being destroyed. Historians will be kept busy for years cataloguing the destruction, and will have an even harder task trying to find a single instance in which Bush did something worthwhile.

It's no defense to say that Bush was enabled by a stacked federal bench, a supine Congress, an intimidated and lazy media and, at one point, a frightened citizenry. All that may be true, but it's no excuse. It is some small measure of comfort that even Bush appears to realize that things went awfully wrong. It's an admission of failure to argue, as he now does, that his presidency was a success because of what didn't happen. If the best you can say is that you weren't attacked (again), you don't have much of a case.

*Oh, and did I mention he never did catch Osama bin Laden?*