

BALLOT BOX

You Can Make It With Plato

Bush's difficult relationship with reality.

By William Saletan

“The American people need to know they got a president who sees the world the way it is.”

That's the message President Bush conveyed this morning on *Meet the Press*. He sees things as they are, not as liberals wish they were. As Bush put it:

That's very important for, I think, the people to understand where I'm coming from—to know that this is a dangerous world. I wish it wasn't. I'm a war president. I make decisions here in the Oval Office in foreign policy matters with war on my mind. Again, I wish it wasn't true, but it is true. And the American people need to know they got a president who sees the world the way it is. And I see dangers that exist, and it's important for us to deal with them. . . . The policy of this administration is . . . to be realistic about the different threats that we face.

Realistic. Dangers that exist. The world the way it is. These are strange words to hear from a president whose prewar descriptions of Iraqi weapons programs are so starkly at odds with the postwar findings of his own inspectors. A week ago, David Kay, the man picked by Bush to supervise the inspections, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that his team had found almost none of the threats Bush had advertised. No chemical and biological weapons stockpiles. No evidence of a renewed nuclear weapons program. No evidence of illicit weapons delivered to terrorists. “We were all wrong,” said Kay.

Again and again on the *Meet the Press*, Tim Russert asked Bush to explain the discrepancies. Again and again, Bush replied that such questions had to be viewed in the “context” of a larger reality: I see the world as it is. Threats exist. We must be realistic.

This big-picture notion of reality, existence, and the world as it is dates back 2,400 years to the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato believed that what's real isn't the things you can touch and see: your computer, your desk, those empty barrels in Iraq that Bush thought were full of chemical weapons. What's real is the general *idea* of these things. The *idea* of a computer. The *idea* of a desk. The *idea* of an Iraqi threat to the United States. Whether you actually have a computer or a desk, or whether Saddam Hussein actually had chemical weapons, is less important than the larger truth. The abstraction is the reality.

Plato's successor, Aristotle, took a different view. He thought reality was measured by what you could touch and see. That's the definition of reality on which modern science was founded. It's the definition Colin Powell used when he told the world Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. It's the definition David Kay used when he set out to find the weapons. Kay and Powell are dismayed by our inability to see and touch the weapons. But Bush isn't. He isn't going to let Aristotle's reality distract him from Plato's.

In Bush's Platonic reality, the world is dangerous, threats exist, and the evidence of our senses must be interpreted to fit that larger truth. On the night he launched the war, for example, Bush told the nation, “Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised.” Russert asked Bush whether, in retrospect, that statement was false. Bush replied, “I made a decision based upon that intelligence in the context of the war against terror. In other words, we were attacked, and therefore every threat had

to be reanalyzed. Every threat had to be looked at. Every potential harm to America had to be judged in the context of this war on terror.”

You can hear the gears turning in Bush’s mind. *We were attacked on Sept. 11, 2001. That attack exposed a new reality. That new reality changed the context for interpreting intelligence.* Or, as Howard Dean less charitably puts it, if Bush and his administration “have a theory and a fact, and [the two] don’t coincide, they get rid of the fact instead of the theory.”

The more you study Bush’s responses to unpleasant facts, the clearer this pattern becomes. A year and a half ago, the unpleasant facts had to do with his sale of stock in Harken Energy, a company on whose board of directors he served, shortly before the company disclosed that its books were far worse than publicly advertised. Bush dismissed all queries by noting that the Securities and Exchange Commission had declined to prosecute him. “All these questions that you’re asking were looked into by the SEC,” Bush shrugged. That conclusion was his measure of reality. As to the different version of reality suggested by the evidence, Bush scoffed with metaphysical certainty, “There’s no ‘there’ there.”

On *Meet the Press*, Bush handled questions about his service in the National Guard during Vietnam the same way. Russert reminded Bush, “The *Boston Globe* and the Associated Press have gone through some of their records and said there’s no evidence that you reported to duty in Alabama during the summer and fall of 1972.” Bush replied, “Yeah, they’re just wrong. There may be no evidence, but I did report. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been honorably discharged.” That’s the Bush syllogism: The evidence says one thing; the conclusion says another; therefore, the evidence is false.

Why did Americans elect a president who thinks this way? Because they wanted a leader different from Bill Clinton. They liked some things about Clinton, but they were sick of his dishonesty in the Monica Lewinsky affair and his constant shifting in the political winds. Bush promised that he would say what he believed and stick to it.

On Iraq, Bush fulfilled both promises. “What I do want to share with you is my sentiment at the time,” he told Russert. “There was no doubt in my mind that Saddam Hussein was a danger to America.” Note Bush’s emphasis on his subjective reality: “my sentiment,” “no doubt in my mind.” When Russert asked Bush about his unpopularity abroad, Bush answered, “I’m not going to change, see? I’m not trying to accommodate. I won’t change my philosophy or my point of view. I believe I owe it to the American people to say what I’m going to do and do it, and to speak as clearly as I can, try to articulate as best I can why I make decisions I make. But I’m not going to change because of polls. That’s just not my nature.”

No, it isn’t. Bush isn’t Clinton. He doesn’t change his mind for anything, whether it’s polls or facts. And he always tells the truth about what’s in his mind, whether or not what’s in his mind corresponds to what’s in the visible world.

What are the consequences of such a Platonic presidency? The immediate risk is the replacement of Saddam with a more dangerous fundamentalist regime. Bush is certain this won’t happen. “They’re not going to develop that, because right here in the Oval Office, I sat down with Mr. Pachachi and Chalabi and al-Hakim, people from different parts of [Iraq] that have made the firm commitment that they want a constitution eventually written that recognizes minority rights and freedom of religion,” Bush told Russert. “I said [to Mr. al-Hakim], ‘You know, I’m a Methodist. What are my chances of success in your country and your vision?’ And he said, ‘It’s going to be a free society where you can worship freely.’”

There you have it: The regime will be pluralistic, because Bush believes it, because nice men came to the Oval Office and told him so.

Beyond Iraq, the risk is that the rest of the world won’t believe anything the U.S. government says. Bush explained to Russert that he invaded Iraq in part because “when the United States says there will be serious consequences” and those consequences don’t follow, “people look at us and say, ‘They don’t mean what they say.’” True enough. But

meaning what you say won't get other nations to join you in policing the world, if what you think and say bears no relationship to reality.

The punch line is that Bush accomplished exactly what he set out to do in this interview: He showed you how his mind works. Republicans used to observe derisively that Clinton had a difficult relationship with the truth. Bush has a difficult relationship with the truth, too. It's just a different—and perhaps more grave—kind of difficulty.

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