

I Survived the Bush Presidency

by *The Daily Beast*

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From “Brownie” to the beleaguered author of *The Pet Goat*, Part III of The Daily Beast’s [Farewell Chronicles](#) presents an oral history of the shell-shocked survivors of the Bush administration.

The Bush administration was notable for claiming dozens of political victims, only some of whom were Democrats. We interviewed the survivors who feel particularly burned by the Bush brand—everyone from the last New England Republican to a fired U.S. attorney to a children’s author whose book about a goat became fodder for Osama bin Laden. Their reflections on the last eight years are below.



Former Rhode Island Sen. Lincoln Chafee voted against the war in Iraq and the Bush tax cuts. And yet the Republican brand was so toxic that he lost in the 2006 midterms—the elections Bush called a “thumping.” Chafee is no longer a Republican.

The old joke about “how do you tell when someone’s lying? Their lips are moving”—the joke became reality for the president. The other thing is I think that history will look back at these eight years and say they were the Cheney years ultimately.

I was there for the first six of them and he was the one who stood up in the Republican caucus and said forget about that campaign promise about regulating carbon dioxide and a big cheer went up from the Republican caucus. [Bush] said we were going to regulate carbon dioxide, but Cheney made sure it wouldn’t happen, and on and on it went. The real muscle and brains of the last eight years has been the VP Richard Cheney and I think the president has just been a hapless cheerleader. That was his reputation back in school—a rah-rah guy, a cheerleader, and he was good at it. Ducking the shoe—that’s his strength.

“Part of me kind of wants to scream, ‘I told you so,’” says former FEMA Director Michael Brown.

Michael Brown was the FEMA director who will be forever remembered by President Bush’s salute in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: “Hecukva job, Brownie.” He became an administration scapegoat and resigned in September 2005.

In a word, it’s disappointment. From the beginning of the creation of the [Homeland Security] Department, it was like Homeland Security became almost a stepchild and regardless of how dysfunctional it was it was like the White House just no longer cared. So there was this chance to reform and make a lot of changes and it just didn’t happen. Part of me kind of wants to scream, “I told you so,” but I won’t do that.

Look, I don’t dislike the guy. Am I mad? Frustrated? Disappointed? Sure, as he probably is with me. Having said all those things, he has some good qualities. He is a caring individual—I can think of times being in the car or in a meeting and actually having a good, fun time.

In 2006, Connecticut Cong. Chris Shays became the “last New England Republican”—the only GOP representative

left in the region. Over the next two years, he deviated from the party line and yet was still defeated by his Democratic challenger in 2008, rendering the entire New England caucus Republican-free for the first time since the founding of the party.

I have resisted what seems to be the popular thing, which is to find every reason to criticize George Bush. The bottom line to it is he had opportunities that he didn't seize. He did some things wrong and he did some things right. I voted with him less than 50 percent of the time and the last two years I voted with him about 35 percent of the time. I really tried to represent my district but I wasn't going to fall into the tempting position of just beating up on him. Because frankly the last two years people have been able to succeed politically not by not coming up with solutions but just by bashing Bush.

David Kuo served as special assistant to President Bush and the Deputy Director of the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives. He later accused President Bush of renegeing on "compassionate conservatism" and manipulating Christian voters.

There's still this certain measure of disbelief that things could have turned out as poorly as they did. Obviously, [Bush] comes off a wickedly divided election and gives a widely heralded inaugural speech, one of the best of the 21st century. There's this sense of this man with this momentum and guiding ethos and it's just like it evaporates.

As with most train wrecks, there's this part of the brain that says, "This can't be happening, there has to be this other explanation." But then the rational part of the mind says there is no explanation. The truth is that the people of the administration are guided by no particular agenda other than the continued expansion of their own power for the sake of owning power. There's no fundamental reason for governing. They're not trying to accomplish something. I guess that's what happens when you're not fundamentally grounded. It's Gertrude Stein: "There was no there there."

Zig Engelmann is the author of The Pet Goat, the book President Bush was reading with schoolchildren when he was first informed of the 9/11 attacks. He continued reading for several minutes before being escorted away by aides. Osama Bin Laden later brought up the book while mocking Bush in a videotape.

I wrote this story that they were reading during 9/11 and I've really hated to be associated with that kind of publicity, but there it was. That's what they were reading in the Booker Elementary School when he got news of 9/11. It was a horrible event and a horrible situation in terms of how Bush handled—or didn't handle—it. It struck me that, "Holy cow, what's our priority now—listening to kids read a book or doing something about this unbelievable disaster?"

There was a reporter who said to me, "Well, everyone gets 20 minutes in the spotlight, and this is your 20." Well, I don't like the color of that spotlight one bit. Just being associated with it is ugly.

No one learned the price of crossing Bush more than former U.S. Attorney David Iglesias. After being appointed to serve New Mexico by Bush, he was fired in 2006 after he refused to comply with the administration's politicization of the office.

Given the fact that we live in a short attention-span culture, I think people will forget a lot of this. I just hope that the courts don't forget. I hope that the career people [in the Justice Department] don't forget. I am hopeful that the integrity will be restored. Trust will take longer.

We were fired over two years ago. The matter has been reported incorrectly as being over. It's still not concluded. I am hoping that after the civil lawsuit it goes to Supreme Court and we get a favorable ruling that specifically limits the use of executive privilege because this administration used it willy-nilly way too often. The Constitution clearly describes three coequal branches of government, not an executive branch and two lesser ones.

Former Undersecretary for Defense Policy Douglas Feith may still support the war in Iraq, which he helped design, but President Bush? Not so much.

My straight forward opinion on Bush is mixed. I think he did some very important things that helped make the country

more secure and I think he made some serious errors that undermined his own strategy and his own policy. One of the things he got wrong was he did a terrible job of explaining to the American public and the world what he was doing and why. It wasn't just a matter of how he explained the rationale for the war in Iraq. It was how he talked about Iraq for years.

The essence of the problem was that when the critics of the administration started saying things like "the whole war was built on an error," and then they escalated their rhetoric and said "the whole war was built on a lie," the administration did an abominable job of answering that. They often refused to engage their critics, and that is something that I condemn in my book. The administration just fell down on the job of strategic communications and allowed a lot of very important issues to be defined by its critics, to the detriment of the country. When the political heat fades, and people look to the facts, I think there will be a reevaluation of this administration.

Roger Stone is a Republican consultant who led the "Brooks Brothers riot" against the Miami-Dade County election board during the Florida recount in 2000.

There have been many times I've regretted it. When I look at those double-page New York Times spreads of all the individual pictures of people who have been killed [in Iraq], I got to think, "Maybe there wouldn't have been a war if I hadn't gone to Miami-Dade. Maybe there hadn't have been, in my view, an unjustified war if Bush hadn't become president." It's very disturbing to me.

Matthew Dowd joined the Republican Party because of George W. Bush and served as his chief campaign strategist in 2004. In 2007, Dowd publicly [repented](#) and said he was considering a life of missionary work.

I think he sought to do good. I think it obviously didn't turn out that way. Sometimes good intentions don't lead to a good place. I just think the way he operated after September 11 was that he had this sort of this West Texas sheriff attitude, like "I can stand up to all the bad guys myself. Everyone else go back to their homes." Whoever was giving advice on the war and on economic policy, it was bad, but he made the decisions ultimately. He made the mistakes. You can't put it on anyone else

I don't have regret or feel guilty. I do have some remorse. You put your hopes and your beliefs and your energy and time into something you believed in and it didn't turn out the way you thought it would. It's grieving. You grieve what you had wanted and hoped for. It's a grief process you go through, just like the stages of grief. You finally get to a place of acceptance.

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