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The Boy in the Bubble

Bush is our boy in the bubble, and it's killing us around the world, killing us in Iraq, killing us at home. This stuff just makes my teeth hurt.

From the beginning I smelled a whitewash. The idea of dispatching James A. Baker III and Robert Gates, members of the president's handpicked Iraq Study Group (ISG), to report on Bush's miserable, deadly, destabilizing war of choice struck me as cronyism in the extreme. The ISG's stated mission was to present real-world strategic alternatives to "staying the course."

I had my reasons to be skeptical. Gates was George H. W. Bush's CIA chief, and he was now W's pick to replace Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense. Baker struck me as a White House sycophant who may as well have had PARTISAN HACK tattooed on his forehead. He was "Poppy" Bush's secretary of state and the Bush family fixer in Florida when Al Gore defeated W. in the 2000 election by a half-million votes and Florida hung in the balance by truckloads of hanging chads. If you believed the 2000 election was stolen in Florida, then Jim Baker is the guy who stole it from Gore.

I was dead wrong about the ISG's elite bipartisan brain trust. Talk about an inconvenient truth: the blisteringly critical "Baker-Hamilton Report," released on December 6, 2006, as the nation was marking the sixtieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor, described Iraq as a "grave and deteriorating" crisis. The report presented seventy-nine recommendations that read more like an indictment of Oval Office and Pentagon hubris, incompetence, stupidity, and delusion. It was.

That day, I did a "Cafferty File" piece on a very different kind of day of infamy. "The president looked old and tired," I said on the air, "the kind of old and tired you look after carrying a heavy load for a long time. The war in Iraq is an unmitigated disaster and everybody knows it. The Republicans know it, the Democrats know it, our country knows it, and the rest of the world knows it. And for the first time this morning, it looked like President Bush knows it, too."

Or did he? Bush should have been down on his knees kissing Baker's ring for giving him seventy-nine clues on how to extricate us from the butchery of Baghdad and the costliest war on the cheap ever waged. Instead, Bush retreated into his bubble of smugness and unreality. He cavalierly shrugged off two key Baker-Hamilton points—troop reductions and talks with Syria and especially Iran—while he cast about for yet more guidance from more experts for still more photo ops. He said he wouldn't be pinned down by benchmarks, deadlines, and troop drawdowns, but "we will complete the mission."

Days later, Bush was asking for another \$99 billion for Iraq and mulling a "surge" of up to forty thousand *more* troops. He was insisting not on solutions but on sanctions against Iran for refusing to halt its uranium-enrichment programs. He seemed more focused on finding a way into Iran than a way out of Iraq—a war he finally conceded that we were neither winning nor losing, just fighting. As Maureen Dowd wrote in her *New York Times* column: "Poppy Bush and James Baker gave Sonny the presidency to play with and he broke it. So now they're taking it back."

Instead of expressing deep gratitude for the ISG's wise, consensus-driven blueprint to get us the hell out of there, our commander in

chief was wandering around his own twilight zone hawking a New Way Forward. Like the campaigns before it, this ad campaign only confirmed that he, Cheney, and Rummy had absolutely no grasp of much of anything when it came to this war.

If Bush had been praying for a magic potion, Baker & Co. hadn't brewed it. Maybe Casper the Friendly Ghost would whisper the presidential daily briefing into Bush's ear at 3 A.M. and tell him what he should do next.

My problems with Bush and his problems with leadership have to do with his alarming lack of curiosity and his refusal to listen to anyone outside his inner circle, his mantra of fear and the big-lie photo-op propaganda that drives it, his reckless, secretive expansion of power in the name of freedom and the war on terror, and, perhaps most of all, his refusal to even *once* look the American people in the eye and admit, "I made a mistake. I blew it. I apologize."

This failing is at the heart of 90 percent of Bush's problems with the public. Even high-profile screw-ups—from jocks junked up on steroids to perp-walking pols and CEOs to boozy, ethnic-slurring Oscar winners—know that if you've got the balls to say into a camera, "I was wrong, I'm sorry," you will be forgiven. This country would forgive *the devil* if he said those magic words. But they are anathema to George W. Bush, despite a very long list of occasions when he should have considered saying them.

I'm no shrink, but I have the sense that Bush has carried an angry chip on his shoulder for much of his pampered life, seething just beneath the good-old-boy surface. When he has fallen short or failed, he's been bailed out by oil barons, by corporate fixers, and by his father and James Baker. Maybe he compensates for his defeats by relying on swagger and faith, but that can only get you so far when the world is blowing apart.

Bush has proved incapable of accepting responsibility or holding himself or others accountable. He fired Rumsfeld two years too late and only then after top generals and the military media called for Rumsfeld's head and GOP midterm candidates kept their distance. He rejects scientific studies on everything from body counts to global warming to embryonic stem cell research that don't reinforce his political base or religious beliefs. He has lied to the American people, while placing himself beyond the law and our constitutional checks and balances. Along with his posse of spinners and Swiftboaters, he has not only blamed the media for delivering bad news, he has sought to prosecute the media for delivering worse news.

In April 2006, *Boston Globe* reporter Charlie Savage broke a remarkable story: instead of vetoing legislation that he did not fully back or agree with—as the Constitution allows—Bush simply issued little-known “signing statements” that empowered him to revise, unilaterally interpret, question, or disregard more than 750 separate statutes or provisions contained in bills that he had signed into law. By early 2007, Savage was reporting that the figure had jumped to 1,149 statutes—nearly double the number of laws questioned by all forty-two prior presidents combined—contained in some 150 bills. (A single bill may have forty or sixty provisions; some people keep score in different ways when it comes to these signing statements.) Of course, Congress can override a veto with a two-thirds majority vote in both houses, but Bush apparently isn't comfortable with having to beat those odds, as provided by the Constitution. So he has taken the law literally into his own hands with signing statements—far outpacing their use, more specifically, by Clinton, Bush 41, and Ronald Reagan.

The *Globe* story got brief media traction as members of both parties (and the “Cafferty File”) assailed this quiet but frightening concentration of power. Many such interpretive signing statements that related to spying, search and seizure under the Patriot Act, torture, government whistle-blowers, and other issues were presumably viewed as weapons in the war on terror. This intrusion of “presidential intent,”

fundamental to the Bush administration's theory of the ever-expanding "unitary executive," challenges the long-established notion of "legislative intent" when courts are asked to interpret laws passed by Congress. In February 1986, a then-unknown Reagan Justice Department lawyer named Samuel A. Alito Jr., now Supreme Court Justice Alito, drafted a memo in which he recommended "making fuller use of Presidential signing statements." The primary objective in doing so, Alito wrote, "would be to increase the power of the Executive to shape the law." In the hands of Bush, Cheney, and attorneys general John Ashcroft and Alberto Gonzales, the unitary executive concept has assumed the potential to become code for *autocracy*.

Bush has failed more than any predecessor in memory to express or embody a unifying sense that he, too, has a stake in the greatness of this country, in the real war on terror, in the economy, and in the fact that we are all in this together. Instead, it's: "I know what's best, I'm the Decider. Trust me. Be very afraid, but keep shopping. And don't you dare question my judgment."

Scary stuff, boys and girls.

It is remarkable to recall where George Bush stood, literally and figuratively, on September 14, 2001. That Friday, President Bush climbed the still-smoldering ruins at Ground Zero, grabbed a bullhorn from an NYFD firefighter, and declared, "This nation stands with the good people of New York City, and New Jersey and Connecticut, as we mourn the loss of thousands of our citizens." When someone shouted, "I can't hear you!" Bush was loud and clear: "I can hear *you*! The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon."

That was arguably Bush's finest moment: he became not just our president but also the trusted leader of our country. Until then, he had been elusive about his agenda, more sizzle than beef. He seemed to

be cast adrift in a boat without a compass, unsure of what his job description entailed. Then Ground Zero clarified his mission, and he rose to its challenge on that gargantuan mountain of grief. His approval rating neared 90 percent. We all wanted to kill the bastards who attacked us.

Our history has always been that when we are attacked, we put our differences aside and unite to fight the common enemy. Our common enemy that day was Afghanistan's ruthless Taliban and their al-Qaeda confederates. Yet over the course of his presidency, by conflating 9/11 and Saddam and by transforming Iraq into a de facto Islamic terrorist state, Bush has managed to divide his own country and unite our enemies who have no country of their own.

One defining element of the Bush era is the triumph of stagecraft over statecraft, rhetoric over substance, and damage control over candor. Perhaps the mother of all stage productions, on May 1, 2003, was Bush's infamous flyboy photo op aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln* beneath the banner proclaiming: MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. That day he announced, "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended." A chopper could have easily ferried Bush from Naval Air Station North Island (San Diego) to the carrier's deck some thirty miles out in the Pacific Ocean. Instead, the White House insisted the president be decked out in a flight suit, a helmet, and goggles aboard a sleek Navy S-3B Viking jet fighter, which he briefly joysticked before it made a cable-ready 150 mph tailhook landing after two roaring fly-bys.

What was not accomplished that day was a truthful account of the event. At first, the White House claimed that the *Abraham Lincoln* was too far out at sea to use a chopper—then it came clean. It also claimed that the banner had been made and hung by the carrier's crew to salute its just-completed ten-month Persian Gulf mission. Later, as fighting raged on in Iraq, Bush disavowed the banner's message and the White House finally admitted that the crew had asked for the banner but that the White House had paid a vendor to make it.

Many Bush appearances have since had the same phony, tacky,

choreographed taint. This has been government of, by, and for the slogan: Shock and Awe. Gulf Coast Recovery. Strategy for Victory. Clear, Hold, and Build. Stay the Course. New Way Forward. Secure Fence Act. Surge and Accelerate.

There's a good reason for all this micromanaging the message: when Bush does veer off script, he usually screws up. Who can forget the day in April 2004 when a reporter asked Bush to reveal his biggest mistake so far and what he had learned from it. Bush stalled for time, looked off nervously, and then said, "You know, I just, I'm sure something will pop into my head here in the midst of this press conference, with all the pressure of trying to come up with an answer, but hadn't yet."

Just stop talking. Don't talk off the top of your head. Go to Karl Rove and ask him to have something written for you. If Bush isn't reading from a script, it's like he's playing with hand grenades.

Sometimes Bush seems dumber than a box full of rocks. To have intentionally created everything that has gone down on his watch, he would have to be a lot more Machiavelli and a lot less Mr. Magoo.

One incident that got my blood up was Bush's flying down to New Orleans for his first visit, four or five days after Katrina, after grudgingly cutting his summer vacation short. The president happened to arrive the very same day that the military relief convoys finally showed up. I went on the air and said, "Gee, you don't suppose that's a coincidence, do you, after five days of these people with no food or water in the Superdome. You suppose that was an accident?"

Remember the story in early 2006 about Jason McElwain, an autistic high school senior in upstate New York who had never played a minute of basketball for his school team? In the final four minutes of his final high school game the coach sent Jason, the team's equipment manager, off the bench for his first-ever court time. Jason promptly threw down six straight 3-pointers and added a bucket for an astounding 20 points in four minutes. It was a terrific human-interest story that moved on all the wires, on the Internet, and on television. Jason even got game from Hol-

lywood, which tossed two dozen movie offers his way. A month later, he signed a movie deal with Columbia Pictures, with hoop legend Earvin “Magic” Johnson on board as an executive producer.

Bush’s handlers didn’t need a twenty-four-second NBA shot clock to know a fast-break, slam-dunk photo op when they saw one—and could use one. On March 14, his itinerary for upstate New York, where he was pitching his Medicare program, was tweaked just enough to airlift him aboard Air Force One for a two-minute meet and greet with Jason, his parents, and his coach on a frigid tarmac at Greater Rochester International Airport. The timing was right: that very day the president’s job approval rating hit a then-record low—36 percent, according to a CNN-USA *Today*-Gallup poll. “Mind if I call ya J-Mac? You call me George W.,” Bush said. He told a small gathering that Jason’s was the story of “a young man who found his touch on the basketball court, which in turn touched the hearts of citizens all across the country.”

As Bush turned to reboard Air Force One, a reporter called out, “Mr. President, how’d you hear about the story?”

Bush didn’t seem to be expecting any Q & A.

“Saw it on TV,” he said. “Saw it on TV and I wept. Just like a lot of other people did. It’s one of those stories that touched a lot of people’s hearts.”

“Somebody play it for you, or did you just see it?” the reporter nudged.

“Can’t remember exactly how it happened. Probably somebody played it for me, you know, bein’ the president and all. But it’s a wonderful story. God bless.”

I was really steamed. This kid brought tears to your eyes, Mr. President? *Why didn’t Katrina bring tears to your eyes?* Thirteen hundred dead and you didn’t do anything about Katrina for days. You don’t go to servicemen’s funerals. You don’t show up at Delaware’s Dover AFB when the bodies come home to be laid to rest, you don’t allow us to see the flag-draped coffins, and you express no real emotion or sympa-

thy for the families of our fallen heroes. Where's your compassion for the rest of the country, you opportunistic, calculating jerk?

There is nothing genuine about the man. A lot of things in this country since 2001 should have made the president weep, but he hasn't shed a tear for anybody.

We don't have royalty—no monarchs, no figureheads, no self-appointed presidents for life, and no dynasties real or imagined. Instead, we have “all men are created equal” and “consent of the governed.” The fact that a Georgia peanut farmer, a Missouri farmer's son and onetime bank clerk and haberdasher, a poor Irish American kid nicknamed “Dutch,” and an Arkansas boy who never knew his father can all become president of the United States should confer on that office a humbling power and reverence all its own. What brushes I have had with past presidents have not only reinforced this view of the presidency, they resonate to this day, and they have plenty to do with my outrage at some of the actions of our forty-third president.

Jimmy Carter was ordinary, a humble, moral, decent, and religious man, though an argument can be made that he was a piss-poor president. I felt that Reagan was the real deal and a terrific leader who, after Carter's morose ramblings about our “national malaise,” brought a sunny showbiz charisma to the Oval Office. Like John Kennedy in the 1960s, he had a natural gift for connecting with people and uplifting them. Richard Nixon was Tricky Dick from day one, but somewhere there is a picture of me standing on top of our huge WDAF-TV truck at the Kansas City, Missouri, airport, massive as a Winnebago, as Air Force One was touching down with Nixon on board. I was just a kid, a local TV reporter covering Nixon's historic peacemaking visit with his longtime political nemesis, former president Harry S. Truman. I interviewed neither Truman nor Nixon that day, but covering Nixon's arrival was incredibly exciting to me anyway.

I grew up with a deeply ingrained respect for the office of the president. If you've got a beating heart, it is impossible to stand near or inside the White House and not be struck by both the real and the symbolic power that emanates from that building. That's how it's supposed to be. That sensation was always there for me.

Then George W. Bush got elected. I admit that I thought Bush was a nifty idea in 2000 as he campaigned tirelessly about restoring respectability to the Oval Office after the moral stains of the Clinton era. I did not like Al Gore at all, and there were a lot of things about Bill Clinton that I could not stand. Clinton is a lying, skirt-chasing weasel who had the good fortune to be in office during our longest and strongest bull market ever. He had no 9/11 and no costly wars to contend with.

I pinned my hopes on the possibility that Bush would be the uniter he had promised to be. Bush came across as easygoing, likable, a man of powerful faith who had turned his life around after some personal battles and some failings and after living in his father's long shadow.

That sure seems like a long time ago. Since then, each glaring misstep, deception, or "bring 'em on" act of arrogance has gradually burned through all of Bush's vaunted "political capital," causing him to morph into an insular, pathetic, intellectually shallow, arrogant, Napoleonic creep. The once likable, down-home Bush style was honed to a rigidly scripted performance. With time, his policies have consistently been nonstarters or worse. Neither he nor his handlers have shown the confidence to put him out there to stand on a level playing field to discuss or debate issues. They stack the crowd by seemingly handpicking the audiences, almost always military, conservative, or both. The GOP staged its 2004 convention in New York City, making sure to mine Ground Zero for all it was worth politically as the three-year anniversary of 9/11 loomed.

Then in 2006 it played to the GOP's advantage that the fifth anniversary arrived six weeks before the midterms. Still, Bush and the GOP had to ride out September's perfect storm: first, degenerate

Florida congressman Mark Foley's resignation and pedophilia scandal involving underage pages, then Bob Woodward's devastating *State of Denial*, then the National Intelligence Estimate's finding that the Iraq war had fomented, not quelled, terrorism. Bush couldn't just mark 9/11; he had to keep marketing it against the "Defeatocrats" who called for troop reductions and an end to babysitting Baghdad's civil war. Bush worked that angle shamelessly for a partisan edge, rehashing ad nauseam the hollow hawk rhetoric on Iraq that seemed disconnected from any news cycles I had been tracking.

"The party of FDR and of Harry S. Truman," Bush said in late September, "has become the party of cut and run." Right, and the party of Warren G. Harding was desperately claiming that a vote for the Democrats is a vote for the terrorists. Bush played the fear card in 2000, 2002, and 2004. The more he vowed never to politicize 9/11, the more transparent and outrageous its exploitation became. This cynical process has always been about keeping the poll numbers up, the war critics down, and the media at bay with the flagging rhetoric of national security and the big bad bogeyman terrorist. Split semantic hairs all you want: Bush stepped out of line the minute he mentioned Iraq and 9/11 in the same breath. It's a tawdry spectacle.

Were the Democrats any better? Are they any better? Not really. They moaned and whined about deserving equal airtime to run some plays out of their own Bush-bashing, fifth-anniversary doomsday playbook. Ain't any of 'em got honor anymore.

Impeachment is a complex issue, but the lack of nerve in Congress, particularly among partisan critics, to face it is disappointing. If a Republican House can bring Articles of Impeachment against Bill Clinton, a Democrat, my guess is that a determined Democratic House could make a case against Bush. It's not as if they're short on material: the prewar lies and cherry-picked intel on WMDs; the NSA

spying and data-mining; illegal torture, detention, and degrading the Geneva Conventions; Halliburton's no-bid billion-dollar deals; the deceitful selling and prosecution of an unwinnable war to nowhere. However it goes, the eventual published transcripts would make the \$40 million Starr Report on Bubba's boogie nights read like a frisky Lynne Cheney novel.

It may never happen. When Wisconsin senator Russ Feingold introduced a motion to censure the president, then majority leader Bill Frist shrewdly said, "Game on, let's put it to a vote," knowing full well the Democrats, who had been ground down and bullied for twelve years by the slick, surgically efficient neocon machinery, would run and hide. Not a single Democrat cast a vote for censure, not even Senator Barbara Boxer, who herself had floated the I-word months before. Senator John Conyers of Illinois, the liberal driving force behind a pair of scathing studies of the administration's constitutional abuses, backed away from the issue. Then there was Speaker-elect Nancy Pelosi, who made a reckless 180-degree turn before the midterms and said impeachment was suddenly "off the table." Off *whose* table? Who the hell was Madam Speaker speaking for anyway? She was not speaking for me.

I have felt for a long time that there is virtually no way for Bush to redeem himself. If Osama bin Laden gimped into the Oval Office right now, tossed his AK-47 and his walking stick on Bush's desk, and put his hands behind his back to be handcuffed, even that wouldn't redeem the president. Our redemption may have to come in the form of some high-profile investigation of Bush or of anyone else who may have willfully shredded the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, the Geneva Conventions, and 230 years of our goodwill among other countries. An open, unflinching inquiry—all under oath—would go a long way toward restoring what is left of our reputation around the world.

Maybe Bush still doesn't get it or refuses to own up to what has happened. During an interview with Brit Hume of the F-word network—where better to go for damage control than the place Cheney went

running to after he shot his pal in the head with a shotgun — Bush said he has no trouble falling asleep at night.

He told Hume about “a bunch of our buddies from Texas” who had just visited the Bushes in Washington. One pal asked, “Man, how come you’re still standing?” Bush told Hume that he understood how the friend could imagine that the burdens and responsibilities of the presidency these days would be unbearable. Wrong! “I tell them it’s just not the case,” Bush said. “I am inspired by doing this job. I believe strongly in the decisions I have made.”

A moment later, he said, “The load is not heavy. . . . It’s a remarkable country when millions pray for me and Laura. And therefore I am able to say to people that this is a joyful experience. Not a painful experience.”

These remarks struck me as obscene. American kids dying and being maimed don’t matter? Tens of thousands of innocent Iraqi people dying and being maimed don’t matter? Forget sleeping—how does this man wake up, look himself in the mirror every morning, and shave?

Ninety-five percent of the e-mails sent to me favored impeachment. People have strong convictions on the issue either way. Ron in Kansas City said impeachment would be “wrong,” “shameful,” and “political suicide” for the Democrats. Another viewer wrote, “The damage [Bush] has caused this nation is incalculable. We will be suffering his legacy for many, many years.” Allen in Oregon dismissed impeachment as “too soft a landing,” adding, “War crimes against humanity is the charge [Bush, Cheney, and others] should be facing, and ultimately punished for. These are the real terrorists.”

Strong stuff. When the American people wake up, they are not to be messed with.

Nor am I. I believe it’s right for us to hold Bush accountable for his most flagrant and egregious abuses of power. If impeachment means watching George W. Bush board Marine One on the White House lawn, Nixon-like, and wave good-bye, then so be it. If it means

prosecuting and finding him guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors, then so be it.

If there's a kinder, gentler way to reestablish the rule of law and define how far these idiots in the administration are allowed to go, then I might let Congress off the hook on impeachment. Otherwise, I say let's get a twelve-foot-high stack of subpoenas, gavel everyone to order, swear 'em all in, and start digging. What are we waiting for? During the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on illegal spying, I said we'd better pray nothing happens to Chairman Arlen Specter because he was "all that was standing between us and a full-blown dictatorship." Think about it: one more Bush Supreme Court pick and it'll be game, set, and match.

People who resist the idea of impeachment say it would be tough on our country. No, the last seven years have been tough on our country—and on everything we have stood for over the course of nearly two and a half centuries.

At the end of my "Cafferty File" setup on the day Baker and Hamilton delivered their scathing report to Bush, I said, "How difficult must it be to come to terms with the fact that you were not only wrong, but that you are becoming more and more isolated every single day." On the air, I asked how Bush could salvage his presidency. Suggestions ranged from bringing the troops home and demanding that Cheney resign and plea bargain himself out of office in exchange for immunity against "the criminal charges he so fully deserves," to insisting that Israel leave the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and Gaza. Sheila in Alabama wrote, "Nothing."

Then there was James in Houston, an endangered-species hawk, who wrote, "Jack, I'm tired of you undermining the war, the president, and the country. We need to be in Iraq. It's not a civil war. But what it is is the central front in the war on terror. And it was right to go in. Why can't you see that? And please smile a little more."

I'll work on it, James.