

Bush as *Time* magazine's "2004 Person of the Year": why him?

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23 December 2004

The absurdity of *Time* magazine naming George W. Bush "2004 Person of the Year" does not necessarily lie in the fact that the US president has pursued reactionary and repugnant policies. One might revile a political leader and still accept his or her selection.

Time notes somewhat defensively that its choices for Person of the Year "are often controversial. Editors are asked to choose the person or thing that had the greatest impact on the news, for good or ill—guidelines that leave them no choice but to select a newsworthy—not necessarily praiseworthy—cover subject."

Previous "controversial" choices have included Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and the Ayatollah Khomeini. Every president since Franklin D. Roosevelt has been chosen, with the exception of Gerald Ford (who was not elected to the office), and every multi-term president has been named at least twice (Dwight Eisenhower first as a military commander).

Bush's name may very well be on the lips of ordinary people, as well as journalists, around the world more frequently than that of any other contemporary political leader. Of course, that name is often preceded or followed by a curse. Global surveys suggest that Bush is presently one of the most disliked figures on the planet.

Yet, being "in the news" is not the same as having a great impact "on the news."

The cover of this week's *Time* carries an illustrator's vision of the president's face and beneath it the text, "George W. Bush—American Revolutionary."

A sweeping claim. In what sense is Bush a "revolutionary"? This is the closest *Time*'s editors come to elaborating on their assertion: "For sticking to his guns (literally and figuratively), for reshaping the rules of politics to fit his ten-gallon-hat leadership style and for persuading a majority of voters that he deserved to be in the White House for another four years, George W. Bush is *Time*'s 2004 Person of the Year."

No doubt, the Bush administration, through its unilateralism, belligerence and unfettered militarism abroad and ferocious assaults on democratic rights at home, introduced changes into the world and domestic political arena (none of which, parenthetically, *Time* submits to a serious analysis).

Yet, how much influence has Bush as an individual exercised on this process? After all, a monstrous figure like a Hitler no doubt has a powerful impact on world affairs, and from that point of view alone might be selected newsmaker of the year. Even if one considers the present administration in Washington reactionary and sinister, however, is it accurate to regard Bush as a master criminal moving pieces around on a global chess board?

Such a view is ludicrous on its face. What is Bush, separated from the power and trappings of his office? His only truly outstanding feature, to which figures such as former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and security adviser Richard Clarke have testified, is the scale of his ignorance and incompetence. This is a singularly unaccomplished and unimportant man.

One only has to ask the question: If Bush had been subtracted from the past year's events, if American imperialism had operated on auto-pilot, so to speak, how would things have turned out differently? Was there one decisive juncture, a single event, about which one could say: George W. Bush was the critical factor, for better or worse, his presence made the crucial difference?

The sycophantic lead piece in *Time*, co-authored by Nancy Gibbs and John F. Dickerson, asserts, "An ordinary politician tells swing voters what they want to hear; Bush invited them to vote for him because he refused to. Ordinary politicians need to be liked; Bush finds the hostility of his critics reassuring."

The "tough guy" picture that *Time* attempts to draw throughout its "Person of the Year" issue is a falsification. Courage in politics involves asserting

oneself in opposition to the powers that be, “against the stream.” Bush’s political modus operandi, on the other hand, always to be on the side of the wealthy and powerful, never to make a move without the guarantee of their backing, suggests a different moral and intellectual type.

Time argues that Bush won over the majority of the population, despite their dislike for his policies, by “betting that what they wanted more [than a change in direction] was leadership.” Is it true that Bush has demonstrated leadership, even within the framework of bourgeois politics?

Surely such a quality must imply at least a modicum of foresight and understanding. The single event by which one must judge Bush’s leadership over the past two years has unquestionably been the invasion and occupation of Iraq. It is enough to recall that this is a man who posed under a banner reading “Mission Accomplished” in May 2003 and declared that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed.” And he no doubt believed it! Since that time, more than 1,000 US troops have died and an Iraqi nationalist insurgency has emerged, grown more sophisticated and gained wide support.

We have had four years, more than enough time, in which to size Bush up. What comes across, aside from his incapacity to pursue a coherent argument and his ineptitude in every public setting, are his pettiness, vindictiveness and wide streak of sadism. Embittered, psychologically fragile and undeveloped, Bush has a natural attraction to the bully, the thug, the Bernard Keriks of this world.

He is attracted to thugs—and to toadies, like the members of the American media. What is one to make of three *Time* reporters seriously questioning Bush about “his place in history”? Asked about the difference between his re-election campaign and those waged by Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, for example, Bush sagely begins his reply, “Mine was different because the circumstances were different.”

This is a man and an administration that has yet to face serious resistance. The key to Bush’s election victory lies neither in his supposed willingness to resist critics and stand his ground, nor yet in Karl Rove’s tactical brilliance, but principally in the absence of an opposition party. The Dickerson-Gibbs piece is peppered with demoralized and worshipful comments from Democratic Party officials. They are already preparing to throw the 2008 election. Widespread social opposition to Bush’s

policies, which finds no expression anywhere in the political establishment, is not yet organized.

The dislike for Bush’s policies is palpable, however, and measurable. Gibbs and Dickerson note that a *Time* poll has the president’s approval rating at 49 percent. Gallup has it at 53 percent, the lowest December rating for a re-elected president in the polling organization’s history.

A *Washington Post-ABC News* poll indicates that a “solid majority,” or 56 percent, now think the invasion of Iraq was a mistake. As for Bush’s domestic policies, clear majorities oppose every one of his principal initiatives. According to a *Time* survey, only 33 percent of the population think he has a mandate to partially or fully privatize Social Security; 38 percent believe he has a mandate to change the tax code.

To his dog, every man is Napoleon. Bush appears a colossus to corrupt and ignorant media personalities who share his essential outlook and count on getting even richer under his new administration. In any event, what politician would not appear unassailable if he had only the ineffectual hand-wringing of a Nancy Pelosi or a Harry Reid to worry about?

That, however, hardly settles the matter. Objective processes are at work. Even before its installation January 20 the new Bush administration is in disarray. To the crisis surrounding the figure of Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and the growing scandal of abuse, torture and murder in US detention centers now can be added the devastating attack in Mosul. The vast trade and budget deficits loom over the financial world. The election resolved nothing.

It is impossible to predict with certainty, but the cover of *Time* magazine may prove a kind of kiss of death for Bush. A major American publication is hailing the resolve and effectiveness of an unstable, widely hated administration whose policies must provoke social discontent sooner rather than later. And discontent on a mass scale. Let us see how Bush’s “ten-gallon-hat leadership style” holds up under those conditions.



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