BOOK REVIEW

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What We’ve Lost by Graydon Carter
Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 340 pp., $25

A tiresome tirade of recycled Bush bashes

by Martin Kaplan

If you believe, as Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter does, that President Bush heads "one of the most secretive, deceptive, vindictive, unaccountable, reckless, and downright venal administrations in American history," then you’ll find in Carter's new book, "What We've Lost," plenty of material supporting that view.

But plenty of current books also do that, from "The Book on Bush: How George W. (Mis)leads America" by Eric Alterman and Mark Green to offerings from John Dean, Kevin Phillips, Michael Moore and many more.

With so many bestsellers making the case against reelecting Bush, what does Carter bring to the party?

Imagine a book that pierces the veil of the Bush administration's success at deception and recklessness and at manipulating the media and public opinion. Who better than Carter, maestro of the nation's bible of buzz, to deliver that account?

Or imagine a scorched-earth psychobiography of the president and his lieutenants. Are they evil, or stupid? Prisoners of ideology, or testosterone-driven bullies? Vanity Fair has excelled in commissioning devastating profiles of public figures; what if its editor himself subjected the incumbent crowd to that scrutiny?

Or imagine a magisterial, book-length essay about what we've lost in America during the George W. Bush years, an elegy for democratic values, a jeremiad about jingoism, an effort to put the venality of our 21st century leaders into the context of the centuries that preceded it.

Well, dream on. Whatever you might hope for from Carter -- based on the best that has appeared in his magazine -- fresh investigative reporting, dazzling polemics, insider dish and lacerating wit are nowhere to be found in his book.

Instead, Carter has delivered a term paper. Virtually everything in it has been recycled from some other source. It reads as though he had a platoon of research assistants assemble loose-leaf binders on Bush's record on the environment, education, the economy, the judiciary, the war and so on, but that he himself had neither the time nor inclination to do more than write the barest connective tissue to string the examples together. There is nothing original or interesting that animates this book: no theory of what makes Bush tick, no thesis about why half the country doesn't think he's a disaster, no narrative of how the country has come to this pass.

Nor is even the invective much good; the book consists mainly of pointing. Look at this bad thing Bush did! And this one! And this! The best you can say about it is that the examples are decently organized. There may be plenty of source material here for
Kerry-Edwards speechwriters, but shouldn't there be a difference between a bunch of bullet points and a real book?

The idea suggested by the title is seductive. What have we lost? Is this period in our history an aberration, or are deep shifts under way? Is America resilient, or is irreversible damage being done? What kind of nation were we before Bush became president, and who will we be after him?

Rising to the challenge of the book's title isn't a matter of compiling bullet points about the backgrounds of Bush's political appointees, or of assembling clip files of goofy Bush quotes and outrageous Bush policies. It takes actual thinking, and real writing. It requires some historical understanding of how we got here, and some real feel for the tectonic plates of American life. What journey is America on, and what conflicts are driving us? If we are living a nightmare, as Carter believes, then why do half of us so willingly dream it?

Instead of this, Carter gives us the gift of Googling monkeys, the kind of thing that caffeinated undergraduates churn out on all-nighters.

No one who wants Bush to lose in November will be disappointed by the talking points Graydon Carter has assembled. But Carter's Editor's Notes at the start of Vanity Fair offer a glimmer of what he might have had to contribute. New Yorker senior editor Hendrik Hertzberg's "Politics: Observations & Arguments, 1966-2004" shows how even short, fact-rich polemics can also be intellectually interesting. Unfortunately, the answer to "What We've Lost" seems to be the 25 bucks the book costs.

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