

**THE BLOG**

Washington, Lincoln, Bush

By Marty Kaplan

02/17/2008 02:43 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Here's a desirable "learning outcome" for first grade students in the public schools of Georgia: being able to answer the question, "How are Washington, Lincoln, and Bush alike?" In their classrooms, Georgia's 6-year-olds "will compare and contrast information about Washington, Lincoln, and our current president. This information will be recorded on a Venn diagram."

I don't know how many other states require this Venn diagram to be created, or whether first-grade teachers will accept — as information for the place where the three presidents' circles overlap — commonalities like not having gills, possessing opposable thumbs, or putting on their pants one leg at a time.

But I do know that George Bush loves to say what he has in common with Washington and Lincoln: how little it matters what people say about him today. "I don't think you'll really get the full history of the Bush administration until long after I'm gone. I tell people I'm reading books on George Washington, and they're *still* analyzing *his* presidency," he told *60 Minutes*. At Camp David, he told ABC's Charlie Gibson, "I tell people I read three books on Washington last year, and if they're still writing on the first guy, the 43rd guy isn't going to be around to see it... I spent a lotta time reading about Abraham Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln had no earthly idea that the Gettysburg Address was a great speech.... You know, history, it's just, it, I, I've always felt that there needs to be a long leash to history. That you can't judge an administration, immediately. And, particularly one that has pushed hard for some big ideas, like, like, my administration has done."

Ah, yes, those big Bushie ideas. Tax cuts in wartime, the unitary executive, signing statements, waterboarding, gay-baiting... You can almost imagine a first grade exercise that teaches them. Put a circle around the ones that don't belong:

- A. American Revolution.
- B. Civil War.
- C. Iraq War.

- A. Beware the baneful effects of the spirit of party.
- B. The party lash and the fear of ridicule will overawe justice and liberty.
- C. Democrats are terrorist-loving cut-and-runners.

Bush, of course, takes the long view of his place in presidential history. No one who saw this fly-boy swagger beneath the “Mission Accomplished” banner (on the *USS Abraham Lincoln*, no less) is qualified to characterize that act as one of the most loathsome, preening, hubristic degradations of the presidency in all of American history because... well, because none of us is dead yet! It’ll take a hundred years, and a hundred books, before people have the perspective needed to acclaim his guitar-strumming indifference to Katrina as just what our glorious Republic needed from its POTUS at the time. His flying back from Crawford for a midnight signing of the Terry Schaivo bill? Why, the only presidential historians who can call that one correctly (a victory for the rights of the undead? a miracle of long-distance diagnosis?) will be the great-great-grandchildren of kids in first grade right now.

I have no difficulty imagining the future historians who will rank W right up there along with the Father of Our Country and Honest Abe, rather than way down there with Warren Harding and Franklin Pierce. After all, the servile savants already beatifying Bush on Fox News, right wing talk radio, and in *The Washington Times* are as likely to pass their genes and memes down to future generations as is slime mold, and the Snopes clan that inherits the earth in Faulkner’s dark vision. And as someone who lived through the Nixon terms, and then the Nixon funeral, and the Reagan terms, and then the Reagan funeral, I’m all too familiar with the press’s fondness for the revisionist airbrush. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*: speak only good of the dead.

The thing I’m having trouble imagining, though, is the scenario for America’s future that George W. Bush thinks will ultimately make him look good. Does he really believe that future historians will look back at his Middle East record as the happy tipping point between radical-fundamentalist-jihadist-extremism and freedom-is-on-the-march? Or does he secretly hope that the tragedy looming in that region’s future will be blamed not on him, but on his successors who inherit his broken crockery? Can he really imagine that his contempt for checks and balances, and for the Bill of Rights, will one day be compared favorably to Lincoln’s boldness in saving the Union? Or does he believe deep down that the fact he ended up not being impeached will in the long view of history more than outweigh any pesky lefty aspersions about his abuses of power?

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