

Focus on Bush

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 20, 2000](#) issue

Sunday morning comic sections occasionally include one of those confusing hidden pictures which can abruptly assume a different shape depending on how you focus on the images. Some people insist there is no three-dimensional shape in those colorful blocks of color; other smugly know that there is. Those shapes are like a poem, which calls on the reader to grasp the meaning in the design. Which brings us to the question of what we can discern from the long drawn-out process that has given us a new president, more than a month late.

Roughly half of the nation is either delighted or reasonably pleased; the other half is disappointed or perhaps even angry over the action by the U.S. Supreme Court that finally concluded the election. It doesn't matter, really. The inauguration will take place in January. Now it's up to us to look closely at the picture we have and try to see what shape this presidency will take.

Now that George W. Bush has emerged as our next president, what can we expect from his leadership over the next four years? Will our attitude toward his presidency be shaped by late-night comics or will we focus on what he is trying to accomplish and find the good in what he has to offer? If that is hard to do, think of President-elect Bush as a southern governor with little national or foreign experience; in other words, think Carter and Clinton, and go from there. Keep an open mind. Otherwise you will never be able to discern the shapes hidden in those colorful patterns we call American democracy.

There is much to be hopeful about in a George W. Bush presidency. To begin with, there is the record of his father, whom the son clearly admires and hopes to emulate. Although it included the major misstep of the gulf war, the first Bush administration was nevertheless a presidency that tried to accomplish what his son has described as "compassionate conservatism." There was no meanness in the elder Bush and there appears to be none in his son—a welcome reality in a Republican Party that spent eight years trying to undo a Clinton presidency in a spirit of spiteful moralism.

The promise of a Bush presidency, depending on one's willingness to focus on positive rather than negative images, is that George W. Bush has a record of getting along with Democrats to accomplish what he feels is best in a given situation. Of course, his experience is limited, but don't forget the baseball stadium that he persuaded tight-fisted city leaders to build—an accomplishment, his admirers insist, that suggests what he will be able to do with the Congress. But as Bush's critics are quick to point out, nothing in Bush's Texas legislature compares with the power and access to media of a Senator Hillary Clinton or a Congressman Barney Frank, articulate voices who will promote a left-wing agenda that can be as passionately vindictive and obstructionist as any voice heard from the political right.

President-elect Bush's desire to be a compassionate leader will face its first major challenge from hard-line conservatives in his own party, led by House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R., Tex.). As Juliet Eilperin notes in the *Washington Post*, "Though fellow Texans of the same generation and party, Bush and DeLay are in many ways more different—in style, philosophy and background—than they are the same."

In his campaign, Bush promised programs to bolster education and health care (especially Medicare prescription drug coverage), even as he repeated the standard Republican desire to cut taxes and increase defense spending. DeLay, on the other hand, wants to reduce social spending and is passionately conservative on social issues. (He is also pragmatic; he knows the votes are not there for passage of an antiabortion constitutional amendment, and he doesn't plan to push that losing cause in Congress.) And DeLay is not alone. One of his allies, Representative John T. Doolittle (R., Calif.), told the *Washington Post* that he wants the Bush administration to block campaign finance reform, protect gun owners and dramatically cut federal regulation.

Still, Bush could surprise us by employing his boyish charm and political skills to introduce coalition politics to Washington. It is said that Bush has the hands-on approach that made Lyndon Johnson so effective in dealing with both allies and opponents in Congress. Indeed, an evenly divided Congress could provide the healing balm the country desperately needs. Legislative success, not just partisan victory, is needed, and this will require both compassion and civility.

We have had far too much meanness in recent politics, starting with the harsh rhetoric and personal attacks from the left in the Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas hearings, continuing with the bullying tactics that led to the impeachment of Bill

Clinton, up to the cable TV-driven tabloid rhetoric of the presidential campaign and the month-long struggle by Al Gore to find enough Florida votes to change history. Of course, it may turn out to be one of history's ironies if, in the next few months, the final official vote count in Florida gives Gore the votes he needed. By then, however, it won't matter. It is the swearing in, and not the taped replay, that is conclusive in elections.

Will compassionate conservatism work for the next four years? It could, but only if the nation will look closely at George W. Bush and focus on his positive rather than his negative patterns. After that there is hope and prayer, but isn't that what we do with every president we send to the White House?