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## **Bush Shows That Politics Is Theater**

**by Sheldon Richman**

Politics is corrupt theater. Actors set the mood, and some members of the audience have their pockets picked.

Exhibit A is President Bush's surprise trip to Baghdad on Thanksgiving. What's important is not the secrecy or the collusion by anointed members of the news media. It's the use of soldiers as props to amplify the big lie, namely, that the mission in Iraq is relevant to the security of Americans. This is a president whose administration is always looking for footage for campaign commercials. Remember when he donned a flight suit for the photo op on the USS *Abraham Lincoln*? That was the day he declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq. So why was it reported that on Thanksgiving Bush flew into a "war zone"? And this is the president who, when he spoke in England, had a designer backdrop studded with the words "United Kingdom." That wasn't for the benefit of the Britons.

So lunch with the troops in Baghdad was just the latest move in the perpetual campaign. He met with no Iraqis; they are merely the "liberated," that is, occupied.

It was pure theater, which is to say, mood-setting and emotional button-pushing. This is nothing new in politics, and it would be unjust to credit Bush with creating it. Funny thing is that when his predecessor did such things, Bush fans went apoplectic — and for good reason.

To say that politics is theater is to say that it is superficial. The debates between candidates and parties, both formal and informal, are shallow and confined to minor details. (See the recent Medicare tussle.) What takes center stage is the competition between personalities, especially the ability to create certain feelings in voters. In the end most people select a candidate on the basis of whether he or she makes them feel safe about the future. They know better than to take campaign promises seriously. Bush promised to be vigilant about government spending, to eschew nation-building, and to effect a foreign policy of "humility." What did the country get? The biggest spender in decades who has yet to veto an appropriations bill, the most confounding nation-building project in American history, and a strategic doctrine of offensive ("preventive") war. If a private company made false promises on such a scale it would go out of business.

Why do people allow this to happen? Because they are powerless to prevent it. Despite the humbug about the glories of democracy, most people realize that, individually, they have no chance of casting a decisive vote. When was the last time an election outcome would have been different had you stayed home (or not stayed home)? Since no one voter makes a difference, no one has an incentive to take his vote seriously. People may protest that they do indeed take their votes seriously, but imagine that a genie granted your wish that whoever you vote for in the 2004 presidential election will win. I believe you would prepare for that election far differently from how you'll prepare for the actual one.

Economists call this "rational ignorance." Think of what it would take you, a busy person making a living and perhaps raising kids, to become really knowledgeable about the things a president (or congressman) has to deal with. Who has that kind of time? Who is able to read the federal budget — and understand it? Members of Congress don't.

Since regular people cannot devote themselves to such research and since, even if they did, their one vote would be no more potent than an ignorant vote, they substitute a proxy for knowledge about issues: the mood created by the candidates.

Thus the skills rewarded in politics are not related to knowledge, wisdom, or even administrative prowess. Thespian skills are what win. The only uncertainty is over which mood the voters are looking for this time.

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