

# George W. Should Welcome the “Dummy” Label

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**L**et there be no mistake about it. The label has been applied. And it will not be removed.

George W. Bush is a dummy. “Dubya” is “Dumbya.”

Begun, embraced, and fostered by the left, the description has now become the property of late-night comedians and “Saturday Night Live.” There will be no relenting.

Al Gore was a stiff. Bill Clinton a skirt chaser. George Bush is an idiot. As usual, the Republican is stupid and the Democrats are something else (but never stupid).

For what reason is Bush a dummy?

Some with a long enough memory will recall the November 1999 pop quiz Bush failed when asked who were the leaders of Chechnya, Taiwan, Pakistan, and India. That was a test that any Ph.D. in international affairs, who are mostly more theoretical than practical anyway, would've flunked (including myself).

To assert that this revealed a lack of intelligence is sheer blather. Some will cite a mangling of words by Bush every now and then. That's nonsense, too. Bush's malaprops are merely watched and recorded more, as were Dan Quayle's. Any Gore watcher could give you an equally long list. Besides, since when does bad syntax make you stupid?

In fact, it was ridiculous that Gore was portrayed as the smart guy among the two 2000 presidential candidates. How does one measure smarts? If we go by tests, Gore had lower SATs. Bush scored over 1200 on the SAT, a very high score, especially by the older standards. Gore had much lower grades as an undergraduate and graduate student than Bush. A *Washington Post* article reported that Gore's grades in his sophomore year at Harvard were lower than any semester Bush spent at Yale. Gore got a D, one C minus, two C pluses, and one B minus. The *Post* noted Gore spent the year

... shooting pool, watching television, eating hamburgers, and occasionally smoking marijuana.

Grades aside, as an adult, Gore authored an outrageous book on the environment, filled with ludicrous statements that, if penned by Bush, would have labeled Bush the dummy of dummies. As a presidential candidate, Gore foolishly argued that the government should subsidize day care and abortions and should not pursue a missile-defense system because it violates a 1972 U.S.-U.S.S.R. treaty based on the principle of mutual assured destruction. How any thoughtful adult can boil down abortion—a painfully obvious “life issue” as simply a woman’s “health care” issue, as Gore does, is beyond me. I certainly don’t deem that enlightened thinking.

The dummy tag was applied to Bush well before the formal campaign, certainly long before the debates. To cite just one example, there was the January 19, 2000 article by Kevin Merida of the *Washington Post*, titled, “George W. Bush: Is He or Isn’t He Smart Enough?”

Over the next few years, Bush critics will look hard for malaprops and gaffes and use them to justify the dummy label. But careful historians will note that the label was already there.

The tag was applied by critics on the left. It will continue to be applied throughout George W.’s career. It was applied by the left because the truth is that liberals generally view conservatives as stupid.

Conservatives, you see, lack sophistication. They think big government can be more harmful than beneficial. They favor cutting taxes. They generally don’t support government funding for the arts. They see a “woman’s right to choose” as a simplistic black-and-white life issue that’s actually much more “complex.” Conservatives lack complexity, nuance—as Reagan demonstrated in calling the U.S.S.R. an “Evil Empire.” They are simpletons. Their simplistic ideology is not based on a strong intellectual underpinning, a reading of political philosophers like John Locke or Leo Strauss or any of the Founding Fathers, a study of economists like Friedrich von Hayek or Milton Friedman, a study of Biblical or Natural Law, a belief in the timelessness of a masterfully written U.S. Constitution, or even a lifetime of careful observation of human nature, or America, or the world (*all of which conservatism is in fact based upon*) but instead on an unseemly, “reactionary,” almost Neanderthal, knee jerk mentality.

I’ve found that many liberals also see conservatives as stupid because they simply don’t talk to conservatives about issues, nor do they read their publications. Nearly every debate I’ve had with a liberal is easy because the liberal simply hasn’t heard most of the arguments I’m using, even though they’re common among all conservatives.

With all that said, here is a remarkable assertion: George W. should welcome the dummy tag. This seems silly, even ridiculous. But it’s true. Of course, he must accept it because it will be applied regardless of whether he desires it. Even then, however, he ought to welcome it. That’s because the label will help him. It may even save him.

**Dumb or Mean**

First, the dummy label avoids more malicious tags that would endanger his presidency and maybe even kill it.

The elites who create and dominate perceptions and opinions of presidents are in media and academe. These people, as literally every survey has shown, are almost entirely liberal Democrats—at least 80 percent among journalists. Academe is worse. One study showed only 3 percent of academic historians describing themselves as “conservative,” compared to 90 percent “liberal.”

These perception/opinion makers—and that’s undoubtedly what they are—don’t agree with and generally do not like Republicans, especially conservative Republicans. One of the worst academic offenders of this is Fred I. Greenstein. His recent book ranks presidents by (his summation of) their “intelligence.” While he ranks some Republicans (like Reagan) well for their “emotional intelligence” he generally perceives liberal Democrats as possessing much greater intellect. He finds almost every Democratic president, including even L. B. J., intelligent.

Greenstein should know better. He once had that view of Dwight Eisenhower, but learned that the opposite was the case, and informed the world in his book on *Ike, The Hidden-Hand Presidency*—to Ike’s immense benefit.

He’s now saying negative things about Bush’s intelligence, as he did about Reagan as well. “He gives the impression of one not wanting to use his mind, not liking to use his mind,” condescended Greenstein in describing Bush in August. “[He’s] one not comfortable with the play of ideas.”

Ironically, this assessment reminds me of Greenstein once quoting Richard Rovere of the *New Yorker*, who arrogantly and wrongly said that to Eisenhower “knowledge is a revulsion.”

For whatever reason, liberals in general, particularly in media and academe, seem to use one of two labels to attack the top conservative leaders who at whichever point in time head up the Republican Party. These leaders seem to get tagged as either: 1) dumb or 2) mean spirited. For those for whom the dummy charge simply seems too ludicrous, they tend to receive the mean-spirited label.

Those who found themselves in the mean-spirited category have included Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Newt Gingrich, Phil Gramm, Bob Dole, John Ashcroft, and others. (I assume that a President Dick Cheney, a very smart man, would get it as well.) Sometimes the “mean” label seems to be applied when it has no warrant at all. Gramm, who holds a doctorate, is a case in point. Those who’ve met him (including myself) or watched him know Gramm is a heck of a nice guy, and were flabbergasted to hear him described as mean.

Nixon and Gingrich, in particular, were always portrayed by the media and academe as brilliant but mean. During the holiday season, Newt was the “Gingrich That Stole Christmas.” Nixon was despised, and still is. To watch the press behave during a Nixon campaign stop in 1960 was an exercise in shocked disbelief at the hate, hostility, and incivility. In his 1996 run for the presidency, Bob Dole didn’t seem dumb; instead he was deemed “mean”—an absurd claim for anyone who has known or observed Dole.

And this is why Bush should welcome the dummy label. A Republican politician doesn't want the “mean” label. It is destructive. It invites destruction and hatred.

On the contrary, the dummies included Ike, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and Dan Quayle—and now George W.

But the good thing about being labeled a dummy—and I know this sounds but crazy, but it seems to be true—is that when the perception makers hang that on you they seem to leave the mean-spirited label aside, especially if you truly aren't mean spirited, which Bush isn't. In so doing, these leftist elites have at least satisfied their need to hang something negative on the conservative. Yet, the truly valuable thing about getting the dummy tag instead of the other is that it doesn't sway the public at large nor the verdict of history.

The general public largely understands that no one who is stupid could ever reach such heights as the American presidency. Those who think Bush is far from a genius may even like him more as a result. Bush himself wisely understands how the public reacts to intelligence. “I am certainly not the kind of person who talks down to people because of my education,” he told Oprah Winfrey in September. “You can't inspire and lead people by thinking you're smarter than everybody else.”

Aside from the contemporary view of the general public, there's also history's judgment. To that end, serious historians will read the presidential and private papers of this “dummy” president and likely be pleasantly surprised. This is what Princeton scholar Greenstein found on Ike, single handedly propelling his ranking among scholars from “below average” to “above average.” Ike now ranks among the best presidents in history and is known for his intelligence. Reagan scholars, including myself, are now finding the same of Reagan. In another example, I did a piece on Vice President Quayle's role during the Persian Gulf crisis, published in *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, which stunned academics. No one imagined that this alleged dolt V.P. could've done so much and performed so impressively during the crisis.

Also, the dummies were generally liked as people. Reagan was liked as a person, as was Ike. Reagan and Ike carried the highest Gallup approval rating of any two presidents exiting office. The public already likes Bush.

### **The Benefits of Underestimation**

There's a second general reason why it's advisable that W. should welcome the dummy label: underestimation. Like Reagan and Ike (and unlike Quayle), Bush has the intangible—he is secure and confident, and thus not bothered by the dummy image. He knows it's drivel, and apparently cares little. He shrugs it off. He told Kevin Merida of the *Washington Post*:

You've got to be a little amazed at yourself coming to do a story asking some guy who's been an accomplished governor of the second-biggest state in the union about trying to figure out whether I think I'm smart enough to be the governor or the president. It's slightly satirical.

It is satirical. The dummies are the ones who would think that way. Like Reagan, Bush will probably joke about it. When asked by David Letterman on October 19, 2000 how he felt he fared in the first presidential debate with Gore, he said “Well, all I really had to do was prove to people that I could put a sentence together.” Like Ike, he sees the benefit of underestimation. He has already benefited from it and will continue to do so. If he legitimately does or says something “dumb,” no one will be surprised. When he doesn’t act in a “stupid” way (whatever that means), he’ll impress those with low expectations. He has nowhere to go but up.

Time and again, pundits have raved about Bush’s performance in major speeches or key speaking situations—at the August 2000 Republican National Convention, in the debates with Al Gore, in his moving Inaugural Address, in his first major speech before Congress on February 27 (which was effectively a State of the Union speech). Yes, he splendidly rises to the occasion. But he also benefits from low expectations. A strong, well-delivered speech instead becomes a raving success that impresses most pundits.

On the morning after his February 27 speech, CNN’s Tucker Carlson insightfully speculated that Bush’s shrewd political handler, Karl Rove, might be working the phones behind the scenes, telephoning reporters and lowering expectations of his boss. If true, then Rove sees how the benefit of the dummy image can work to W.’s advantage.

Bush is not a good speaker. He’s okay. (This is his biggest difference with Reagan. Of course, no one stacks up to Reagan as a speaker.) As presidents go, he’s probably an average speaker.

The more and more I learn about Reagan, the more I think he didn’t mind, and maybe even preferred, the dummy label. I’ve seen many occasions where Reagan could have easily disputed the charge, such as having his staff leak that he alone had crafted some of his major speeches. But he didn’t do so. The fact that he didn’t doesn’t make a lot of sense—unless he had no interest in disputing the charge. That might stem from his own security and, maybe—maybe—the benefits he saw in the dummy label.

### **Secure to Be a Dummy**

Bush has that security, which prompts another Eisenhower analogy. Bush is like Ike in that he’s secure enough to admit when he doesn’t know something. In an April 1999 interview with William Safire of *The New York Times*, he showed this trait. On the issue of a rapprochement with Teheran: “I am not prepared to talk about that.” Would he, as president, make missile defense available to Taiwan? “I have not made up my mind yet.” On Iraq, did he think Clinton was doing enough to prevent Saddam from developing weapons of mass destruction? “My gut tells me no, but I do not have enough facts to be able to back that up with a statement.” At the risk of engaging in some psychoanalysis, it seems that those who like to call such people dummies for responding “I don’t know” seem insecure themselves—perhaps even a bit authoritarian—and are maybe not thinking very brightly

themselves. By their line of logic, they might prefer a leader who simply evades the issue or makes something up, rather than honestly admit when he doesn't know an answer. I've known students who perceive the answer “I don't know” as a sign of weakness. But obviously, no one can know everything.

Paradoxically, and again, rather stupidly, this dummy image is thriving amidst an absolutely brilliant 2000 political campaign of Bush's, all his own doing, which enabled him to win the presidency amidst an era of unbridled economic prosperity overseen by the opposing party which held the presidency. He also brilliantly decided against going negative against the Clinton-Gore administration despite all the golden opportunities and urging that he do so. He didn't because of the era of “New Politics” he recognized in the early 1990s. (See Bill Minutaglio's book, *First Son*, on this recognition and coining of the term by Bush.) He didn't go negative and won anyway, in large part because of his likability and the positive public perception of him—both offshoots of not going negative. This was extremely smart.

In sum, W. needs to realize that liberal perception/opinion makers clearly need a quick, easy label for attacking a conservative leader or president. Again, for whatever reason, they seem to pick either the dummy or mean tag. There are far more benefits to receiving the former, including the most important of all: History won't let it stick.   Ω