
Rejecting the 'Vision Thing'

"The Oakeshottian President: George Bush and the Politics of the Present" by Dean C. Hammer, in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Spring 1995), 208 East 75th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

The presidency of George Bush remains a puzzle. *Time* magazine summed it up in January 1991, when it named the 41st president "Men of the Year": a double image of him was splashed on the cover as if to say, "George Bush, bold leader of the crusade against Saddam Hussein, meet George Bush, curiously inert domestic political leader." The political scientists are already inventing labels for Bush: "guardian president," "hierarchist," and so on. Hammer, one of their brethren at Franklin and Marshall College, has a new one. Bush, he believes, was an "Oakeshottian" president.

Michael Oakeshott (1901-90) was a conservative British political philosopher who offered his diagnosis of the modern political disease in the title of his most famous book: *Rationalism in Politics* (1962). "For Oakeshott," Hammer explains, "Rationalism is born of a post-Renaissance belief in the authority of reason and a confidence in the attainability through political engineering of the perfectibility of human conduct and condition."

Against this vision, Oakeshott counterposed

a now-famous metaphor of politics as "men sail[ing] a boundless and bottomless sea: there is neither harbor for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behavior in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion."

A better description of Bush's approach to politics would be hard to find, Hammer suggests. It meant eschewing what Bush called "the vision thing" in favor of incremental change, traditional practices, and the acceptance of life's inevitable untidiness. Describing his school-reform agenda in 1991, for example, Bush presented no master plan but stressed its "voluntary," "open-end[ed]," and "local" character. Even his boldest moves fit the Oakeshottian mold. His call for a "new world order" may have sounded like a Wilsonian trumpet blast, but in fact, Hammer believes, all Bush had in mind was a restoration of order, plain and simple. Operation Desert Storm sprang from a similar motive.

So total was Bush's immersion in the Oakeshottian way that he was unable even to mimic a "vision thing" during the 1992 presidential campaign. Trust me to keep the ship afloat, he said to the voters. The voters, however, preferred tales of safe harbors in distant lands.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

A Tale of Two Confucianisms

"Confucianism and Democracy" by Francis Fukuyama, in *Journal of Democracy* (Apr. 1995), 1101 15th St. N.W., Ste. 802, Washington, D.C. 20005.

Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and others argue that Western-style liberal democracy is incompatible with traditional Confucianism. Many in the West, such as Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Hun-

tington, agree. "Classic Chinese Confucianism and its derivatives in Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Taiwan, and (in diluted fashion) Japan," he has written, "emphasized the group over the individual, authority over liberty, and responsibilities over rights."

Fukuyama, a senior researcher at the RAND Corporation in Washington, sees things somewhat differently. Although traditional Chinese Confucianism, which took shape long after Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and held sway in China for 2,000 years, justified a