
LAURA WHO?

POLITICS IN AN AGE OF FICTION

A close-up portrait of Laura Ingraham, looking slightly upwards and to the left. The image is partially obscured by text overlays.

ColdType

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I ONCE visited the “map room” of Philip II, King of Spain, and ruler of the (more or less known) world in the second half of the 16th century. Wandering this large chamber filled with maps from Philip’s time in his grim, crusader palace-monastery, El Escorial, I found myself trying to imagine how he might have conceived of the New World his soldiers had claimed for him. Somewhere, thousands of miles beyond his sight, beyond what could possibly be imaginable in a 16th century Spanish castle, untold numbers of the Indian inhabitants of his New World realms were dying the grimmest of deaths – and this, not so long after Catholic thinkers had been arguing over whether such beings even had souls capable of conversion from heathenism. Mine was, of course, an impossible exercise, but the

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rulership of that one man, of that one mind locked within those stone walls and his limited universe, must even then have been an exercise in fiction, no matter that the results were painfully real.

Perhaps in a way all rulership has to be a kind of fiction. The difference is that Philip's equivalent today, the head of the globe's "lone superpower," is at the center of a vast machine for the creation of fiction, a kind of ever-growing assembly line for its production. I suppose the truth is that the human ego – whether that of the man who "runs" America (and desires to run much of the [known] world) or the CEO of any globe-spanning transnational corporation – only has so much expandability. Even a single megalomaniac ego, an ego stretched to the limits, would have no way of taking in, no less governing, such a world. Not really. Perhaps this is why, increasingly, the President of the United States has himself become a kind of fiction.

Though we elect a single being to govern us, who, in a never-ending political campaign, pretends to hold certain beliefs and policies sacrosanct, and though a man named George Bush now inhabits the White House, sleeps in a bed there, watches TV there, entertains foreign dignitaries or Republican funders there, and does myriad other things, including traveling the globe and nervously driving a 1956 vintage Volga beside Vladimir Putin for the cameras in Moscow, "he" and "his" acts and policies are, in fact, a curious creation.

Of course, we read in the paper or hear on TV every day that the President does endless newsworthy things. Just the other day, for instance, there was a little note at the bottom of the front page of my hometown paper announcing that "Bush Gives a Lecture to Putin." The piece inside, *Bush Tells Putin Not to Interfere With Democracy in Former Soviet Republics* by Times White House reporter Elisabeth Bumiller, began: "President Bush used the 60th anniversary of Nazi Germany's defeat to warn President Vladimir

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V. Putin of Russia on Saturday that ‘no good purpose is served by stirring up fears and exploiting old rivalries’ in the former Soviet republics on his borders.” Just as Bumiller’s piece the day before had begun: “President Bush stepped into the middle of an escalating feud between Russia and the Baltic nations on Friday night as he arrived here in the capital of Latvia at the start of a five-day trip to Europe.” Just as, in fact, a thousand other pieces in papers or on radio and TV news programs would begin almost any day of the year.

The President “does” this or that. It is, I suspect, a strangely comforting thought. Only the other night, I spent a couple of minutes listening to two experts discuss “the President’s” strategy in his meetings with Putin on Charlie Rose. Would he rebuke the Russian President in their private meeting – and do so in a serious way – for his undemocratic rule? Would he follow the State Department “points” prepared for him, or would he just say a word or two about democracy and move on? And either way, would the meeting between the two men be a “success” as both their PR staffs promptly rushed to announce? And yet George Bush’s “rebuke” of Putin was, as we all also know, written by someone else. Essentially, while George spends his life enacting his Presidency, he just about never speaks his own, unadulterated words. To shape them, after all, he has Karl Rove, a bevy of pollsters, and a staff of advisers, speechwriters, spinners, and quipsters hired to do the job.

It was, for instance, then-speechwriter David Frum who took credit for one of the President’s signature phrases, that “axis of evil” line in his 2002 State of the Union speech. (“States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to

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blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.”) Or rather, it seems that Frum’s wife claimed credit for him; then Frum claimed that he had only come up with the line “axis of hate,” amended to “axis of evil” possibly by then-White House chief speechwriter Michael Gerson. Later yet, Frum suddenly recalled that the President himself had scratched out “hate” and scribbled in “evil,” which was probably a polite lie. If he actually did so, that would be strange indeed. After all, just about nothing the President says is really “his.”

In fact, the President is surrounded by a vast coterie of handlers, speech writers, advisers, gag writers, freelancers, pollsters, PR experts, spinmeisters, strategists, footmen, front men, guards, and valets of every sort, along with, as we all know, Karl Rove who more or less created his world – and continues to have a large hand in creating him for the world. Whatever George Bush himself may be, he is significantly an actor whose role of a lifetime is... to play a sometimes shifting collage of traits, policies, and beliefs called George Bush. He is firm before Evil. He rebukes Putin and lectures or hectors the world. He exudes optimism under pressure. He chops wood on his ranch in front of the cameras, being a westerner; or, being a warrior, he dons a specially created military jacket with “commander in chief” stitched across his heart in front of thousands of troops roaring “hoo-ah”; or, being a regular guy, he hits his lines just folksy enough at a rally for his followers to know that he is indeed the real man they believe he is, the sort of character any of them might like to sit down and have a beer with; or, as commander-in-chief of a victorious war, he lands dramatically on the deck of an aircraft carrier all togged out as a flier against a banner saying “Mission Accomplished”; or... well, you can fill in most of this.

If some of this wasn’t “him,” he probably couldn’t do it so well. And in none of this is he a simple alien in presidential history. Such

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a fictional universe has been a long time in coming, but the Bush people have pushed it to a post-9/11 extreme. The President notoriously lives and campaigns in a bubble world where everything – from his informal words to the make-up of any crowd at any rally or “town meeting” – is smoothed and polished, vetted and reformatted for... well, certainly political advantage and comfort and ease, but that doesn’t quite cover the matter, does it?

As with his life and domestic travels, so in the President’s international travels, he and his entourage – including, as in a previous European trip, American escort vehicles as well as the President’s official car (known to insiders as “the beast”), 200 secret service agents, 15 sniffer dogs, a Blackhawk helicopter, snipers, 5 cooks, 50 White House “aides,” and the vast press corps that reports on “him” – move inside an enormous bubble, a kind of dream world. All around him the central cities of the planet he’s passing through are swept clear of life in order to create a Potemkin Earth just for his pleasure and safety. For Bush & Co., all life is increasingly lived inside that bubble, carefully wiped clean of any traces of recalcitrant, unpredictable, roiling humanity, of anything that might throw the dream world into question. In a sense, George’s world has been well stocked with James Guckert clones. (Guckert is, of course, the “journalist” who, using the alias Jeff Gannon, regularly attended presidential news conferences and lobbed softball questions the President’s way.) And George himself, whoever he may be (or may once have been), is a kind of Gannon, when you think about it. A character. A creation.

I’m not normally much on post-modern tropes, but this figure we think of, and the media insistently reports on, as an individual (even while we’re all fascinated by endless tales about ways in which everything around him is managed) is a kind of composite being, a recombinant man, who travels the planet and lives “his” life not just in a bubble of delusion but as a kind of bubble of delusion. He’s a

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shape-shifting, fictional “individual” imposed on and meant to harness the vastness and complexity of reality. It’s a phenomenon so strange that there are, in a sense, no words to describe it.

A HARD DAY’S WORK: LAURA SLAYS THEM, SOFTENS THE PRESIDENT’S IMAGE, AND REINVENTS HERSELF

A SMALL incident involving the President’s wife brought this home to me recently. On the night of April 30 – as no one in the world cannot not know by now – Laura Bush “interrupted” her husband, took the mike in front of a crowd of reporters and celebs at a dim and dreary annual Washington event, the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner (“crab hush puppies, steak, asparagus, warm chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream and berries”), and in a well-scripted and rehearsed routine roasted her husband, his family, Dick and Lynne Cheney, Don Rumsfeld, and assorted others. “She” was promptly hailed for her sense of humor, her timing, her ribald jokes, and her political savvy, or as the ubiquitous Elisabeth Bumiller put it: “[T]he popular first lady accomplished two things. She brought down a very tough house, and she humanized her husband, whose sagging poll numbers are no match for her own.” (No match, in fact, by nearly 40 percentage points.) Bumiller added that “her zingers showed how much the White House relies on her to soften her husband’s rough edges at critical moments, much as she did with her extensive travels and fund-raising in the 2004 campaign.” (Indeed, Laura is a monster fundraiser. Just a couple of days earlier, between West coast drop-ins on Jay Leno and a center for reformed gang-bangers, she scarfed up \$400,000 for the Party with an hour’s stay at an “intimate” little Republican National Committee do.)

The press raves on her brief comic performance came pouring in,

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repetitively so. She had undergone a “metamorphosis” claimed James Gordon Meek of the New York Daily News. Via her comedy routine and by “entertaining more frequently and ha[ving] hired a new chief of staff, new social secretary and new press secretary, she has emerged,” wrote Robin Abcarian of the Los Angeles Times, “as a more svelte, more fashionable incarnation of herself.” She was in the process of undergoing “an extreme makeover,” commented William Douglas of Knight Ridder; while “super-pundit” John McLaughlin was quoted in the New York Post as calling her routine “the best material he’d heard at the dinner in 30 years, and predicted it will help soften her husband’s image.”

In some ways, “her” carefully choreographed performance, previously rehearsed in the “White House Theater,” was certainly an expression of White House dismay over the course of second-term events and the weakening, if not unraveling, of Presidential support in the opinion polls. The second team was essentially being called in – and a team it distinctly was. If the immediate media consensus was that Laura had “softened” and “humanized” George, in almost every article her press secretary Susan Whitson was also quoted thusly on her boss’s sense of humor: “This was the first opportunity that she’s had to show the press corps and the rest of the world that side of her.”

That side of her. Her zingers. And Democrats chimed in: “Mrs. Bush ‘was just brilliant – the whole thing,’ said Senator Charles Schumer.” Her brilliance. Her performance was even assessed in the press by her “peers.” “She paced herself. She didn’t rush any of her jokes. She let `em land,” commented Cedric the Entertainer, the professional comic who was to follow her on the night’s program; and of all the enthusiastic comments about the first lady and her night of success, only Cedric’s seemed on the mark. It was, after all, her performance and she had done it well.

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It was, in fact, such a “success” that in the Rose Garden the next day George and Laura repeated the act, “In the best traditions of George Burns and Gracie Allen, they traded quips during a ceremony Monday honoring historic preservation efforts,” wrote Ken Herman of Cox News Service. The President even referred to his wife as “Laura ‘Leno’ Bush.”

New York Times columnist Frank Rich has already written with his usual eloquence on the subject of this “pageant of obsequiousness and TV Land glitz” and on the way the “Washington press corps’ eagerness to facilitate and serve as dress extras in what amounts to an administration promotional video can now be seen as a metaphor for just how much the legitimate press has been co-opted by all manner of fakery in the Bush years. Yes, Mrs. Bush was funny, but the mere sight of her ‘interrupting’ her husband in an obviously scripted routine prompted a ballroom full of reporters to leap to their feet and erupt in a roar of sycophancy like partisan hacks at a political convention. The same throng’s morning-after rave reviews acknowledged that the entire exercise was at some level P.R. but nonetheless bought into the artifice.” Or as Margaret Carlson wrote sardonically for Bloomberg news service: “The reporters you saw in the East Room at last Thursday’s press conference, preening for the cameras with multipart questions, were the same ones aching to be in on the joke Saturday night.”

But beyond the skilled fakery that passes for reality (at which Bush administration handlers are so able), there are stranger depths here. So let’s take a moment to consider Laura Bush’s performance (which you can watch by [clicking here](#) or read by [clicking here](#)).

As a start, the “first lady’s” portrait of the President and his men was a composite one – in this case, a collage of images that would be commonplace not among his supporters but among his critics:

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He mangles the language (“I’m introverted, he’s extroverted, I can pronounce nuclear...”); by temperament, he’s a destroyer of the environment, or just a destroyer plain and simple (“George’s answer to any problem at the ranch is to cut it down with a chain-saw – which I think is why he and Cheney and Rumsfeld get along so well”); he’s a fake rancher and fake westerner (“George didn’t know much about ranches when we bought the place. Andover and Yale don’t have a real strong ranching program. But I’m proud of George. He’s learned a lot about ranching since that first year when he tried to milk the horse. What’s worse, it was a male horse.”); his family is a mafia-like dynastic clan (“People often wonder what my mother-in-law’s really like. People think she’s a sweet, grandmotherly, Aunt Bea type. She’s actually more like, mmm, Don Corleone.”); and so on.

In this – playing against type – lurks a theory of presidential humor that goes thusly: “Since public perceptions cannot be denied, playing to them shows that the speaker doesn’t lack self-confidence.” As it happens, though it was Laura Bush’s lips that were moving, it’s not her theory, or George’s either. It was laid out way back in 1987 in an interview with Los Angeles Times reporter Donnie Radcliffe (“Writer Helps Politicians Beef Up Images With a Few Choice Words,” Sept. 13, 1987) and it belongs to a man Washington insiders have known for a quarter of a century but whom, until this second, almost no one outside the Beltway has paid much attention to.

His name is Landon Parvin and he wrote Laura’s words, just as he wrote Nancy Reagan’s smash “second hand clothes” routine for the Gridiron dinner in 1982, which was also meant to play against type and “humanize” her (“Second-hand clothes, I give my second-hand clothes to museum collections and traveling shows. I never wear a frock more than just once: Calvin Klein, Adolfo, Ralph

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Lauren and Bill Blass, Ronald Reagan's Mama's going strictly first class"); just as he wrote the speech that contained her husband's not-at-all-funny partial mea culpa for the Iran-Contra scandal. ("People close to the President give Parvin a large share of the credit for bringing Reagan as close as he has come to acknowledging error on the Iran-contra arms sales," reported Radcliffe. The key lines in Parvin's speech: "A few months ago I told the American people that I did not trade arms for hostages, My heart and my best intentions still tell me that is true, but the facts and evidence tell me it is not.")

In fact, over the years he's written speeches, gags, and comedy routines for politicians ranging from Clinton pal Vernon Jordan and Former National Democratic Chairman Robert Strauss to former Secretary of State James Baker, Barbara Bush, and George H.W. Bush. For the present President, he produces "four speeches... every year, including the Gridiron Club bash and White House Correspondents' Association Dinner taken over by the First Lady on Saturday." (If, by the way, you want to check out just how many words a Presidential speechwriter could churn out for a president to mouth, even back in the Neolithic age of the first-term Reagan presidency, [click here](#), scroll down, and don't sprain your wrist.)

Parvin's had a perfect career for a man destined to put words in other people's mouths. He was, briefly, a Hollywood gag-writer, then a PR man for Hill & Knowlton's Washington office, a columnist, an official White House speechwriter, an executive assistant to the American ambassador in London, a freelance speechwriter for the corporate and political high and mighty, and, on the side, a comedy writer for all and sundry in need of "humanizing." He's been a word wrangler for as long as anyone can remember, and his list of customers, the people whose lips moved convincingly as they spoke his words, is nothing short of a composite portrait of power

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from 1980 to the present, the years in which the Republicans took full control of Washington.

Though he claims to hate Hollywood, he brought the TV sitcom's mildly corrosive forms of humor to the town with him – the self-deprecating joke and the basic putdown – to which, with Laura Bush, he finally added a third crucial element of TV comedy success, the dirty joke. It had been a staple of the sitcom for a couple of decades but previously a public no-no in the capital. In fact, his version of this for Laura – the horse masturbation joke – would have made the “family-friendly” right go nuts, had the moving lips been those of a Democratic first lady. (She would have been labeled the inside-the-Beltway Janet Jackson.)

Parvin may be a pro's pro when it comes to wielding the basic vocabulary of television comedy in Washington, but it hasn't always worked for him. He bombed last year in a Radio and Television Correspondents' Association dinner routine he wrote for Bush on the theme of the missing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. However, if those “zingers” on April 30th were anyone's they were Parvin's; if “Laura” was “brilliant,” thank Parvin; if “she” softened the President's image and humanized him, give Parvin a lot of the credit; if she slayed them, the missiles were his. If the Friars Club, famed for its roasts, offered her an honorary membership, “which permits her to enjoy the middling cuisine at the East Side clubhouse or just hang out at the bar,” trading quips with her “fellow comics,” she better take Parvin with her.

But here's the perhaps-less-than-surprising thing: In her part of the political world, Laura Bush seems almost as much a composite creation as her husband. Her hair is at present the property of Toka Salon owner Nuri Yurt of Georgetown, who is now said to be “managing the first lady's softer-looking coif”; her jewelry, “the handiwork of Georgetown jewelry designer Ann Hand,” who creat-

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ed the necklace and earring set she wore for the roast “from different sizes of Swarovski crystals,” and so on through her look. As Abcarian of the LA Times wrote of a recent trip she took to California,

“At every stop, she looked impeccable, not a hair out of place. (Although she does her own makeup, she travels with a hair stylist from a Washington salon.) She wore expensive, tailored pantsuits the entire trip, usually with a Hermes-style scarf around her shoulders. And she is indeed much slimmer than she was at the beginning of the first term.”

The events at the various classrooms and small discussion groups she was scheduled to drop-in on (as with those reformed gang members in LA) were “choreographed for cameras and reporters.” And yet, Abcarian reports with a note of surprise, there were “rare, unscripted moments that revealed something of her old-fashioned sensibility” But on Leno’s show, at the media dinner, in classrooms, or fund-raising for the Republican National Committee (as the President’s “most effective campaign surrogate”), she mostly remained “on message,” even as the message was constantly being re-scripted around her, sometimes with her help.

Laura Bush is then a fiction. She may even be, in part, Laura Bush’s fiction. There’s no way for an outsider to know. In fact, I have no idea what George and Laura Bush are actually like. She may in private be brilliant and hilarious just as her supporters recently claimed, or she may be the eerily disconnected creature Tony Kushner caught in his *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*. At this point, for all we know, the Bushes may not themselves know who they are. In private, they may be dopes or canny operators, superficial or thoughtful, but what they certainly are is actors in a drama too large for any individual to really take

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in, one being imperfectly scripted and stage-managed by teams of others – and, of course, by history, by the press of reality and of the past. Atop an oversized imperial bureaucracy, a vast military machine, a sprawling party structure, global corporate interests galore, and who knows what else (including all of us), even the President turns out to be a midget.

Perhaps the return of the great man theory of history in recent years as part of our fierce domestic culture wars (along with so many Founding Father best-selling biographies), and the insistence of the right on the historical primacy of the individual, is actually a response to the strange anonymity of our over-populated, over-heated present, of a presidency that has a distinctly puppet-like quality to it. And perhaps the urge to vote for George Bush, whether he is for or against “nation-building” or anything else, reflects that same desire to go for the “humanized” being.

ANCESTRAL FICTIONS

WE KNOW that Presidents have long been actors and that they have not always written their own speeches. After all, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton played crucial roles in drafting George Washington’s Farewell Address in 1796; while Abraham Lincoln was, as Garry Wills tells us in his superb book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, “an actor, an expert raconteur and mimic, and one who spent hours reading speeches out of Shakespeare to any willing (and some unwilling) audiences.” Having been invited to deliver “a few appropriate remarks” at the dedication of that cemetery in Gettysburg, Abe wrote those ever memorable 272 words himself (though not in a moment and not evidently on the back of an envelop). He did not, however, always write his own speeches. Wills, for

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instance, gives us stirring examples of how he edited passages from Secretary of State William Seward's suggested conclusion to his inaugural address. This is undoubtedly the preeminent example of presidential editing (possibly of any editing) of which an example is:

Seward: "The mystic chords which, proceeding from so many battle-fields and so many patriot graves, pass through all the hearts and all the hearths in this broad continent of ours, will yet harmonize in their ancient music when breathed upon by the guardian angels of the nation."

Lincoln's revision: "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely as they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

The first official speechwriter to inhabit the White House, Judson Welliver, only arrived on March 4, 1921 to serve as "literary clerk" to President Warren Harding. But over the years, the number of pages of presidential speeches written by others has soared, more than doubling, for instance, between the Eisenhower White House of the 1950s and the Clinton White House of the 1990s. According to the American Presidency website, "The contemporary White House is, in fact, a high-speed prose factory."

That "literary clerk" soon enough began to multiply and presidents came ever more commonly to speak other people's words, even ones with which they would forever be identified. The authorship of John F. Kennedy's most famous line in his inaugural address – "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country" – remains, for instance, in question. (Of course, Kennedy was a man who published a ghostwritten book under his own name – and won the Pulitzer Prize for it!) Richard

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Nixon reputedly relied heavily on speechwriters and yet he also insisted on writing some of his most important speeches himself, while Gerald Ford had a “comedy advisor” named Don Penny.

But the Republican revolution and the arrival of Ronald Reagan in the White House clearly marked a change in the nature of the presidency and of the president. While Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter had all been uncomfortable with (and on) television – that crucial medium of the modern presidency – Reagan was a professional actor who had made his career in overlapping worlds of mass-produced fiction (including an early radio job broadcasting baseball games that arrived over the telegraph wires, and which he reported as if he were on the spot).

What was most striking about Reagan’s much praised (and criticized) actorly “ease” – even his ease of error – was the level of effort, planning, and outright strain that surrounded it. Layers of publicists, handlers, pollsters, and managers worked to script his every step and word. By his second term he had five full-time speech writers on hand, and that didn’t even include freelancers like Parvin or the joke writers who were already becoming as much a part of Washington as they were of Hollywood.

Reagan seemed never to move from his bedroom (where he relaxed in a world of fiction, watching old movies) without the media frame that public relations could construct around him. As the memoirs of those who surrounded him attest, he was not just a passive but a largely absent personality. It was not hard for him to believe anything about himself; that, for instance, he had been away at war during World War II (when he had never strayed far from Hollywood) or that he had photographed the liberation of a Nazi death camp. As a man who had trouble keeping track of his own story, his context had to be constantly manufactured for him.

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It became a cliché of the Reagan-Bush years to note that never had so many political handlers and “spin doctors” been so concerned to control the presidential image of the moment as presented in the media. For the first time, in the 1980s, the various spin-doctors and handlers – the Karl Roves of that moment – became, if not the story, then a kind of parallel story framing the presidential one. The men who were creating the fiction of the Reagan presidency were also gaining a certain news parity with the man who was president without somehow destroying the idea of the President himself.

The media began to offer regular glimpses of the framework of control for the stories they were reporting – with Reagan, for instance, the marks carefully chalked out by aides to indicate where the president should stand for the perfect photo opportunity. Similarly, in election coverage, “spin doctors” began to appear on TV as experts to analyze the spin they had just put on an event, while reporters for the first time discussed with a certain enthusiasm the process of being spun. In this period – thank you, Landon Parvin – sitcom Hollywood entered the mix and instead of the President being mocked by his enemies, he began, disarmingly, to mock himself. (“It’s true hard work never killed anybody,” went a typical Parvin-written Reagan line, “but I figure, why take the chance?”)

Though the coverage of the presidential handlers and spin doctors sometimes passed for exposé, how the public was being controlled was less emphasized than how their leaders and attendant publicists were in control, how firm was their grasp on the technology of presentation. At the same time that an ever more elaborate market-research and publicity apparatus had to be mobilized to organize and sanitize what was on screen, the presidential story, with life sucked out of it, had to be bolstered by ever more elabo-

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rate special effects. Think, to jump a couple of decades, of George Bush's Top-Gun landing on the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. This was the way the deadness lying at the heart of the screen could be given a look of life.

And yet, even Ronald Reagan could, from time to time, take the word-reins in his hands as when, in 1983, he tacked several paragraphs onto a speech calling for greater defense spending against a renewed Soviet threat. He challenged the nation and the "scientific community" ("those who gave us nuclear weapons") to undertake a vast research and development effort to create an "impermeable" antimissile shield in space that would render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." Thus, our first "fictional" president took actual control of events just long enough to create the purest fantasy of defense – his Strategic Defense Initiative or Star Wars anti-missile system – into which we have ever since poured fruitless multi-billions of perfectly real dollars.

In the meantime, vice-presidents had gotten their own speech-writing staffs (as the elder Bush did – including Parvin from time to time – when he was Reagan's VP); and so, for the first time, did presidential wives. The first lady has emerged as a political factor – and political fiction – only in our own time. According to historian of first-ladydom Lewis Gould, "It was not until Lady Bird Johnson – and her mission to beautify America – came along that the first lady had a structured work environment, with a chief of staff, press secretary and policy advisors." Now, it's more or less a necessity for any first lady to have such a mission and a burgeoning staff of handlers, advisors, speechwriters and the like to go with it. "Betty Ford is identified with the fight against breast cancer and her support of the Equal Rights Amendment. Rosalynn Carter chose mental health as her issue. Nancy Reagan will be remembered for her anti-drug crusade and Barbara Bush for liter-

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ary efforts.” Laura Bush is now establishing herself as the first lady responsible for helping young men out of gangs. It’s all, of course, a kind of serial fiction.

ON BEING “HUMANIZED”

“**SPEECHWRITERS** are to the man in the Oval Office what screenwriters are to characters in a film. They’re the ones who write the lines – in the appropriate voice, of course. After all, it’s important to stay true to character or the words just won’t sound right” – so writes Catherine Donaldson-Evans for, appropriately enough, Fox News. And though she concludes that, in the end, the speech is the president’s, not his speechwriter’s, in certain ways it may belong to neither of them.

Once upon a presidential time, before radio and television, presidents simply didn’t give that many speeches (or, for instance, annual State of the Union addresses). Now any “president” produces thousands of pages of words a year, far more than a single literary clerk could have written. Daily at any passing event, on formal occasions with Congress, in regular radio talks, at state dinners and roasts, at national and local disasters and celebrations, on the never-ending campaign trail and in news conferences, the president opens his mouth and words simply pour out – even from someone like George Bush who is known for his relative inarticulateness. And then the President cranks himself up, or is cranked up, and “he” does things, all of which represent the globe’s “lone superpower.”

This is, almost by definition, inhuman activity. It bears little relation to what any individual anywhere else would do. Acting this way, the President could easily seem like an animatronic device

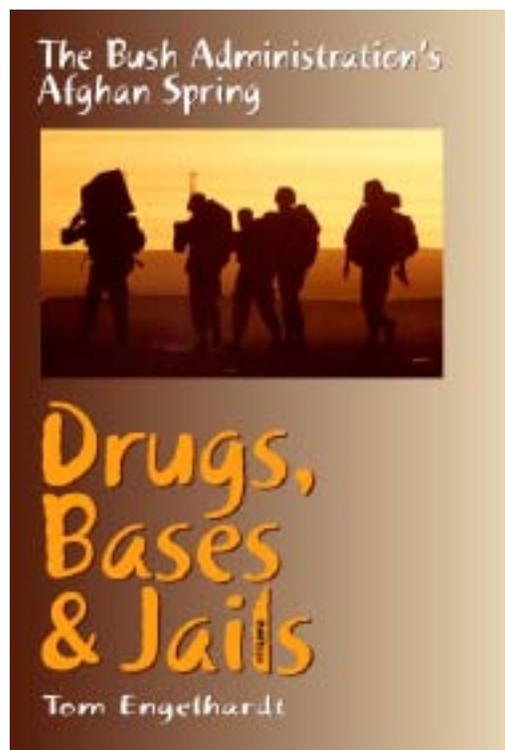
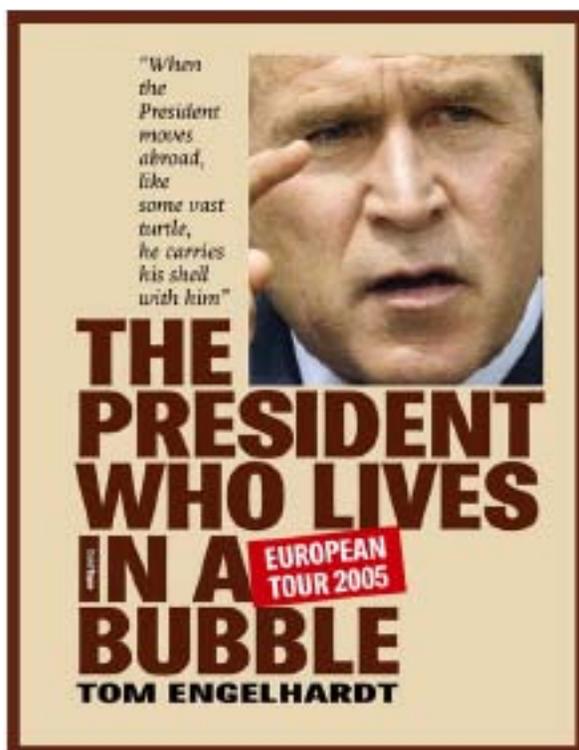
TOM ENGELHARDT / LAURA WHO?

and so he constantly needs to be “humanized” – at which point Laura is wheeled in. All of this – replete with Hollywood-style put-downs and special effects – has become second nature to us, the audience. We have all become used to our fictional political world without, largely, having come to grips with it – least of all has the media that supposedly reports to us in an unvarnished way on how it all works.

But if George and Laura Bush would under any circumstances be fictions of a sort (as well as living, breathing human beings), the nature of this presidency has clearly been pushed to inhumanly fictional extremes. This President, for instance, hardly has an unscripted public moment. If there is one, as the other day in Georgia when he stayed out an hour late for an unscripted dinner with the Georgian president and his wife – a (possibly scripted) “spontaneous moment” – there was much press discussion of this. After all, he normally never meets an unexpected person with something challenging or unexpected to say or does something outside the bubble. He lives in a strangely inhuman way inside that bubble, even as it is constantly being maintained for “him.” His is an extreme form of fiction, one then imposed on the world. It’s an altogether uncanny, not to say unnerving, phenomenon that is now the essence of our lives.

[Many, though not all, of the articles on Laura Bush’s April 30th performance and the response to it were first gathered by Dan Froomkin in two columns at his invaluable Washington Post on-line column, White House Briefing. And, as so often, thanks go to Nick Turse for research help of all sorts.]

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