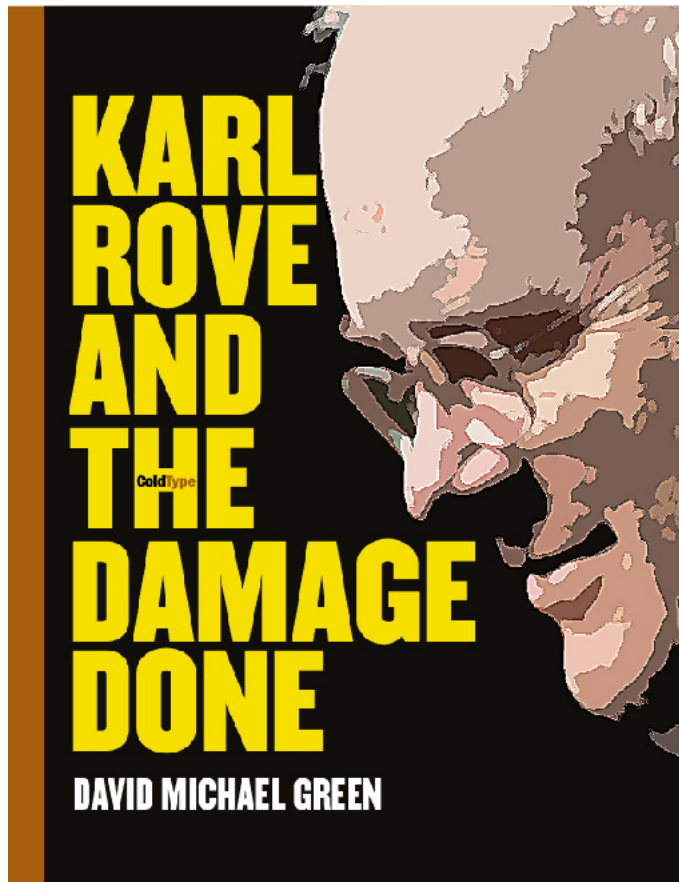


# KARL ROVE AND THE DAMAGE DONE

ColdType

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**I**MAGINE you could be a gambler, and never lose. Now you understand Karl Rove. How can a gambler never lose? Only when he gets to throw the dice, and pick up the winnings, while somebody else stakes the bet. To a certain degree, that's the story of any political consultant. Somebody else finances the campaign, somebody else is the candidate, and the consultant becomes a political genius if the candidate wins, or the poor guy who just happened to be stuck with a lousy horse should the candidate lose. The only thing at stake for the consultant is his reputation, but even that hardly seems vulnerable. Bob Shrum managed to amass an amazing 0-7 win-loss record in the presidential sweepstakes and still got invited by John Kerry to make it 0-8 in 2004.

But Karl Rove is much more than a successful consultant to presidential candidates. His candidate made it to the White House, and to a very large extent, Rove was handed the keys to both the policy and politics hot-rods when they got there. That means that when we say that somebody else provided the stakes with which Rove got to play, we're no longer just talking about campaign contributors with dollars on the line, or candidates with reputations to be made or lost. Now we're talking about American soldiers and Iraqi civilians who've paid the highest price possible for Rove's policy decisions. Now we are talking about American citizens who will be working long hours to finance the debt that Rove ran up. Now we're talking about an entire planet suffering the consequences of global warming negligence for generations to come. And that's just the start.

Rove The Gambler came to the White House with the best deal imaginable from his perspective. He could, in governing, gamble for the highest stakes, and if he won he would be feared and revered as the greatest political genius of his generation, perhaps of the century. But if he lost, other people would pay the price. To those of us whose morality chip wasn't somehow misplaced on the assembly line, such a game might seem momentarily tempting but ultimately too reprehensible to play. Not so for Karl, who not only played, but played with a vengeance, literally and figuratively.

Rove had a dream, and he brought it with him to the White House. The first thing

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to notice if one wants to understand the character of this man – and therefore also the character of the presidency he drove – is the nature of this dream. It was not Karl Rove's great aspiration in life to cure cancer, or eradicate poverty, or bring peace to the Middle East, or double the number of college students in America. No, handed the keys to the government of the world's sole superpower, Rove had something else in mind – something infinitely more meager. His great dream in life was to emulate his hero, Mark Hanna, and reestablish a generational-long hegemony for the Republican Party in America.

If that seems like a small-minded aspiration for a man who fancies himself as a student of history and the big picture, it is. But all the more so because Rove was prepared to do anything in order to achieve his little goal. It is not unfair to say, then, that Iraq has been smashed, a million people murdered, the American military broken, the American treasury depleted, the environment dangerously threatened, the Constitution tattered, and the country's reputation eviscerated – all on a gamble that things would break the other way and... what? Leave the GOP in power for the next quarter-century. Oops. As Maxwell Smart might've said, "Missed it by that much!" What an incredible amount wagered for so little potential return, even if it had gone all right.

Of course, the greatest irony of all is that, not only did the Karl Rove wrecking machine destroy all of those things that most people care about, but it also wound up profoundly demolishing the very goals that Rove himself most sought. The Bush presidency is utterly in the toilet, and it would seem clear even with 17 months remaining that it will be regarded as the very worst presidency across all of American history. As for the Republican Party, its woes were only beginning to become evident with the election blow-out of 2006. Not many people can say that they managed to lose control of both houses of Congress in one election. That rarely happens. But Karl Rove did it.

And 2008 will be even more devastating. Rove might even be correct in arguing that the Democrats will nominate Hillary Clinton and that she is enough of a liability to cost her party the White House, even in a can't miss year. I doubt it, because if there's one thing Clinton is, it's smart, and if there's another, it's ruthless, and she will therefore turn the Republican candidate – with his help, no doubt, as we're already seeing today – into a clone of George W. Bush. Faced with the choice of the obnoxious but harmless Hillary, on the one hand, and four or eight more years of Bushism, on the other, enough voters will hold their nose and choose aggravation over devastation, handing Clinton the White House. But regardless of what happens in the presidential race, congressional elections will be absolutely devastating for the GOP, not only widening Democratic majorities in both houses, and not only ending both the

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Republicans' capacity and will to act as a block on legislative progress, but actually threatening the very existence of the party itself. This happy problem, which couldn't possibly be visited upon a nicer group of fasc..., er, people, will only then be amplified in coming years and elections, as today's young voters – who have already rejected the Republican Party – matriculate through the electoral system, replacing dinosaur GOP devotees who cut their teeth on Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan.

Ironically enough, then, Rove destroyed the very thing that he had mortgaged everything for in seeking its empowerment. And even more ironic yet, he may well have created the very antithesis of what he most coveted: There may well be generational dominance of a single party in our future, yes – just not the one that Rove happened to have in mind. While many of us can't be bothered to shed even crocodile tears for the demise of the Republicans, the collateral damage from Rove's all-in bet has been devastating to everything else that we care about. But, again, no worries for him. He bet with other people's stakes, and he can probably still get lots of work from those candidates willing to do anything to win office (read virtually every Republican).

I don't know what happens in a childhood to produce a figure like Karl Rove, but it can't have been good. Like a serial killer with ice-water running through his veins, for whom the idea of compassion or remorse is a foreign concept, Rove is the quintessential amoral man – the very definition of a sociopath. Don't take the way he treats you personally – it's not that he doesn't like you. He just utterly couldn't give a shit one way or the other, dude. But woe unto you if you possess something that he wants, like money, a vote, cannon fodder capability, or shock troop potential. He will simply say or do whatever is necessary to liberate you from your dollars, your common sense or your life in order to achieve his goals. There are myriad examples, but one which is highly illustrative is Rove's response to Hurricane Katrina. While you and I looked at our television screens and saw there a disaster in which compassion and immediate action were the watchwords of the day, Rove – the guy Bush put in charge of the crisis – was at that exact same moment spinning the gears in his head, literally thinking instead about the partisan political implications of relocating a quarter-million black (and therefore likely Democratic) voters out of the state, thus perhaps putting Louisiana back in the Republican column in future elections.

It's no wonder that a guy with such empathy defects could spot George W. Bush coming from miles away, like freight train rolling down the mountain. Bush was the perfect partner for the exploits of someone like Rove, who once trained under both Donald Segretti and Lee Atwater. Jim Hightower (himself one of the many unfortunate members of the Rovian Wreckage Club) once mused that Bush père – infinite-

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ly more sane and humane than his son, though still borderline on both fronts – was born on third base, thinking he hit a triple. If that’s so, the mind strains to find the appropriate metaphor for the Boy King. Perhaps we could say that he was handed ownership of the entire ball club based on his family name, only to think he had earned it on his own, pulling himself up by his bootstraps. Trouble is, that’s no metaphor at all – it was quite literally true. Sigh.

In any case, it was just this child of privilege who – unlike a similarly situated Roosevelt or Kennedy – utterly lacked the compassion thing, that Rove picked out to be his perfect pony. There would be no political tactic too cheap, no empty bumper-sticker slogan too banal, no policy choice in the service of down-and-dirty politics too destructive, and no shattering of the very fabric of constitutional governance too egregious with George W. Bush as his candidate and president. Rove told him what to do and say, and Bush did it. For a while, though only with the massive assistance of 9/11, it worked.

Nevertheless, from the beginning, I found the notion that Karl Rove was a political genius to be as offensive as it was shortsighted. (And what does it say about the wisdom of our wonderful national punditry that they continued to perceive him as such, in some cases even after November 2006?) But the idea that Rove is a political genius is even more absurd today. In fact, the man has been an abject failure, a flaming disaster, by every metric that counts. Whether we compare his performance to his own aspirations, or we add up the overt wreckage, or the more subtle damage, or if we consider what could have been – in every case this “genius” is revealed in reality to be a pathetic loser.

First, Rove can be easily demonstrated to have completely failed even according to just the limited goals of his own ambition, leaving aside for the moment the matter of its sheer moral vacuousness. In his cover story on Rove’s implosion in *The Atlantic*, Joshua Green reports that the Great Guru had five particular initiatives in mind after capturing the White House, all in service to forcing into existence his dream of a permanent Republican realignment. He planned to “establish education standards, pass a ‘faith-based initiative’ directing government funds to religious organizations, partially privatize Social Security, offer private health-savings accounts as an alternative to Medicare, and reform immigration laws to appeal to the growing Hispanic population”. Notice, again, that none of these were driven by the desire to produce good governance or to better the lot of the American people, and that all of them completely privileged politics over policy.

But notice, also, that every one of them failed in one fashion or another. The White House was able to channel public funds to religious organizations, but not nearly in the quantity it had in mind. It did pass No Child Left Behind, in an attempt to drive

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teachers out of the Democratic tent, but it had the opposite effect and has now become one of the most hated pieces of legislation in recent American history, likely soon to be unraveled or modified completely out of recognition. The others on the list were all complete non-starters, with two of them – Social Security and immigration – blowing up in the president's face, and thus revealing his political impotence (some political capital, George) along the path to substantive failure. Thus, even if we leave aside Iraq (and anyone who believes the White House line that Rove had nothing to do with that decision needs to immediately see the nice man with the white coat and the cup of easy to swallow pills), Rove is a complete and utter failure purely against the benchmark of his own twisted aspirations.

None of his five particular goals was achieved, and the greater vision of a generation of Republican hegemony to which these initiatives were always in service has in fact instead been set back a generation, if not permanently. It is by no means unimaginable that the GOP could now enter into a tailspin of mortal collapse over the coming years, ultimately joining the Federalists and the Whigs on the ash heap of American political party history. But even if it doesn't unwind that far, no one has done this much damage to their own cause since Hitler at Stalingrad. And you can bet that there are a boatload of reformed Republican lemmings on the Hill right now, desperately trying to salvage a mere job from what was only a few years ago an empire, complete with imperious swagger, who rue the day they ever heard the name Karl Rove.

Rove also failed in countless very overt ways (even though many of those bills will not come due until the days and years ahead) against any reasonable measure of what constitutes good governance and a successful presidency. It's fun to watch regressives twist themselves into contorted pretzels with more convolutions than 26-dimensional string theory, trying in desperation to slather on the pancake makeup two inches thick all over the rotting corpse of their political project. But not even the winning mortician from this year's National Taxidermy Championship could revive this mess after the IED of hard reality turned it into so much political hamburger. It's gonna take the computer graphics of Hollywood to have a prayer of convincing voters that the last seven years have been the Good Old Days. Enter Fred Thompson, stage right, of course, as the walking Hail Mary pass late in the fourth quarter. But he is far more likely to produce an Ishtar than the next Star Wars. He's no Reagan, and even Reagan couldn't put a happy enough face on this disaster. Indeed, Thompson, or whoever is unlucky enough to win the nomination, will actually be the anti-Reagan – the Republican Carter of 2008 – forced to defend a status quo that most voters are already more anxious to abandon than a good case of the clap. And if it's that bad today, just wait till 15 months from now when they go to vote. By then

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they'll be trading in their first-born children to get Republicans out of Washington.

Call that Rove's Achievement. Dress it up any way you like. Slop on the greasepaint by the bucketful. Spin it around till it's more twisted than Jerry Falwell's sexual fantasies. It doesn't matter. At the end of the day the record of this presidency – Rove's presidency – is as utterly dismal as it is completely consistent in its dismalness. Turning a record surplus into a record deficit. Failing to defend the country against the 9/11 attacks. Failing to crush or apprehend the alleged perpetrators of that attack. Failing to win a war in Afghanistan. Launching a completely needless war in Iraq. Failing to win the war in Iraq. Destroying the American military. Failing to rescue an entire American city from destruction. The first president since Hoover to lose jobs on his watch. Wages stagnant. Gas prices doubled. Exacerbating global warming, the worst environmental crisis in human history, and undermining attempts by others to deal with it. Undercutting environmental standards on clean air and water. Leaving the Middle East in shambles. Shredding relations with historical allies. Producing the greatest trade deficit in history. Offering tax credits to corporations assisting them in exporting American jobs. Destroying legal and constitutional doctrines dating back as far as seven centuries. Allowing the assault rifle ban to lapse. Standing by while North Korea went nuclear. Tearing up treaties that have kept the peace for half a century. Undermining international institutions. And more, and more, and more.

This is an astonishing, jaw-dropping record of disaster. In saner days, a president would have been run out of town on a rail for nearly any single one of these, let alone the whole lot of them. But we live in strange times, and nobody is more responsible for creating that strangeness than Karl Rove, because nobody has benefitted more from the fear, disorientation and detachment from common sense he produced than he has. That makes it hard, despite this glaring record of sheer failure, for many Americans to comprehend the magnitude of what has been wrought. Indeed, since Democrats utterly lack an instinct for the jugular (or most any other body part), what would be truly amusing would be to see Rove doing a Rovian hit job on his own legacy. Can you imagine the TV ads? The scurrilous rumors leaked to friendlies in the press? The character assassination by innuendo? The fear mongering? Too bad it will never happen – it is perhaps the only way we could truly measure the full extent of this disaster.

So Karl Rove – the man appointed “genius” by the geniuses of the American media – has been a complete failure as measured against his own standards and aspirations, and against even the most charitable reading of the objective benchmarks we associate with any presidency, such as leaving the country safer, healthier, wealthier, more powerful, etc. But, of course, that is just the beginning of the story. The damage done by an amoral man – or, better yet, the wounded child crouching in fear



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within the shell of an amoral man – who happens to control the greatest military and economic machine ever to bestride the planet is potentially catastrophic in theory, and has been quite literally so in practice. It is true that it could have been worse. Then again, it's highly unlikely that we know the full story of 9/11 today, and 17 months remain for Cheney to engineer a military assault on Iran, either or both of which gets us that much closer to the worst outcomes imaginable.

But there is another way in which Rove has harmed the country, though accounting for this particular set of transgressions is a more subtle process. The overt damage done is bad enough, but we would be highly remiss not to note as well the psychological effects, both at home and abroad, of the methods consistently applied by Rove and his minions and master.

Never before has America had such a divisive presidency, certainly not one that was intentionally so. More ironies abound here. Newt Gingrich, the quintessential bomb-thrower and a guy cut from precisely the same sociopathic cloth as Rove, blew-up congressional comity in the 1990s, and then foisted his political ethos on the rest of the country in the form of the shameful Clinton impeachment, a raw attempt at a constitutional coup. Then, after Republicans had spent the previous six years ripping apart the fabric of American political culture, in waltzes another Republican to heal the wounds, a supposed “Washington outsider”, a “uniter, not a divider”, only to become the most divisive president in history. And intentionally so. The story goes that Rove made the decision early in the Bush presidency that the American middle was evaporating, and therefore the key to winning subsequent elections would not be swaying independents, as had been the approach theretofore, but rather doing a better job than the other side of mobilizing the base. That meant throwing more red meat to Wall Street geeks and Schiavo freaks than a whole herd of live Texas longhorns could supply. But it also demonstrated the complete lack of concern for governing well, as this arrogant approach necessarily polarized both Washington and the electorate. That was bad enough before 9/11. No president should ever seek to polarize the country into hostile and angry ideological camps in order to win elections. But after that terrorist attack, when an agonized nation was looking to heal its wounds, it was unconscionable.

To this divisiveness can also be added lost credibility in government. Today, more than 60 percent of Americans do not trust the government to honestly describe foreign threats. That's an astonishing number for any question about institutional trust, let alone one concerning the domain most people consider the core responsibility of government. If we're lucky, most of that will dissipate when the Bush administration finally stops torturing the American public with its very existence, as if all 300 mil-

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lion of us were on lock-down in Guantánamo. It seems to me unlikely that the effect will ever completely disappear, however, especially for younger Americans who've never lived other than under the insane regime of the radical right. And this is precisely the sort of damage I meant when I referred to more subtle forms of destruction. Ever since Ronald Reagan, America has been treated to a steady diet of words and actions undermining the relationship between public and public servants, between the people and their government. This cannot produce anything but a corrosive effect on the health of the polity in the long run, as it very much has already.

Needless to say, if Americans are disenchanted with the actions of the Bush administration, those living abroad are even more horrified. This additional damage shows up repeatedly in polls, and in the destroyed careers of politicians, like Tony Blair, and parties, like José María Aznar's People's Party in Spain. On September 12, 2001, the United States had the deeply felt sympathy and the support of much of the world, including even the people of Iran. Today the country is largely reviled across the planet. That, too is the legacy of Karl Rove.

Which brings us back once more to a final measure of Rove's failure, a comparison of what is with what could have been. Even without 9/11, Rove had the capacity, especially after marketing Bush as a compassionate conservative, to draw the country together around a series of moderate initiatives, cooling down the national acrimony launched for political advantage by his own party in the 1990s. But then after 9/11 this was vastly more true, and it was true, moreover, internationally as well as domestically. The American public, if not much of the world, was ready to rally around a president seeking to defend and protect the common good. To claim that the reality of this presidency in comparison thus represents an opportunity squandered is the understatement of the century. Rove not only failed massively in terms of his own goals, in terms of the direct effects on millions of lives, and in terms of the more subtle destructive effects on the fabric of American democracy, but he also failed massively against the potential for success the administration completely wasted.

In short, no matter what your yardstick (other than, of course, winning elections at any cost), Rove's career represents a complete failure, with tragic consequences for the country and the world.

Recently, I saw an ad in the New York Times for a new book. Two things about this ad were notable. One was that the book's subject is the Marshall Plan, a story of international diplomacy from half a century ago – in short, nothing whatsoever to do with Bush, Rove or contemporary American politics. And yet the other remarkable thing about the ad was the bold-letter text at the top, above a graphic of the

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book, employed today to market a book about a wholly different topic from a wholly different era. It read: “There was a time when the world believed in America and what it stood for”.

That text would not have appeared in an advertisement for this or any other book, back in 2000. But, today, it makes perfect sense. The words well capture, in a single phrase, the legacy of Karl Rove and the damage done.

Rove is often described as a genius, but the record emphatically demonstrates just the opposite. He destroyed everything in sight, including the political party for whose would-be fortunes he willingly sacrificed all else, not least the things that matter most – peace, truth, democracy, integrity, decency, lives.

No, this was no genius, except in the most nefarious sense. The real genius was of the American Founders, who – with just this scenario in mind – built a political infrastructure that could hope to prevent Karl Roves from happening.

As it was, nearly every intended bulwark in that system, nearly every check and balance both inside and outside the government, failed to perform its intended function these last years, and Karl Rove – the smallest amongst us – ran wild for the better part of a decade, cutting a swath of enormous destruction in his path.

Perhaps these ramparts, tattered as they were, were just sufficient enough to slow down the runaway train, though. Perhaps we’ll survive this nightmare and reclaim our government and our sanity, after all.



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