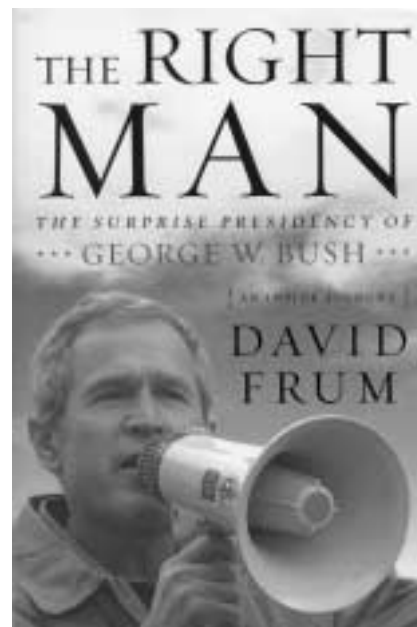


## Wordsmithing for Dubya: He's no Moron, He's the President

David Frum, *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*. New York: Random House, 2003.

Review by John Duffy



**F**rancie Ducros probably should have read *The Right Man*. Had Jean Chrétien's powerful communications director read David Frum's account of George W. Bush in power on the plane to Prague, she might not have been quite so quick there to characterize the 43<sup>rd</sup> president of the United States as a "moron" — which depiction cost her her job.

The sin committed by Ducros and far too many Canadian political players (step forward Carolyn Parrish, Herb Dhaliwal, and many, many more) has been widely depicted as one of indiscretion, rather than misconception. In the conventional formulation, Bush is a dolt, a bumbler, an amiable puppet with high name-recognition pushed forward by a dynastically inclined Republican establishment that pulls the strings from somewhere deep inside Dick Cheney's office. Ducros and the others are thus guilty merely of saying out loud what absolutely everyone thinks but is smart enough to keep quiet — at least around reporters. The idea that they may be flat out wrong about Bush has gone largely unexplored in this country.

It's a shame that more of the Canadian political class won't read *The Right Man*. Frum's is a highly readable, well-reasoned, empirically supported argument that George Bush possesses the qualities most needed since September 11, 2001. "He was," writes Frum, "ambitious in his vision, but careful in his methods; flexible in his relations with Congress, determined in the conduct of the [Afghan] war; stern when sternness was called for, humane when humanity was needed." Whatever doubts may subsequently have been raised on the long diplomatic and military road to Baghdad, it's not easy to dispute Frum's portrait of Bush as a highly successful war president up to the moment of the book's conclusion in the fall of 2002. His lightning-quick, low-casualty victory in the Second Gulf War, should add to that lustre, although that conflict has brought to a head geopolitical issues of such scale and complexity that a final verdict will likely take decades to materialize. So if Bush is stupid, a record like the one that's shaping up suggests we need fewer intelligent leaders.

Mind you, not even Frum is prepared to pass Bush off as some kind of political Einstein. He bluntly states that Bush is "often uncurious and as a result ill-informed; more conventional in his thinking than a leader should be." And Frum doesn't leave it at that; the *problematique* of Bush's intelligence merits a whole chapter. He explains away Bush's intellectual shortcomings as technical difficulties in the lower brain functions: "Words often failed him, his memory sometimes betrayed him..." But, argues Frum, these are not the essentials. What matters are imagination and conviction; "his vision was large and clear." For those unwilling to accept that construction, there's another line of defence. Frum takes the familiar adage, "Bush isn't very smart — he just gets good advice" and turns it on its ear. "A president who consistently recognizes and heeds good advice will make good decisions. And about a president who consistently makes good decisions we can say: He's smart enough."

I am inclined to agree. The fact that Frum is an old friend whose read on people I respect may bias me. The fact that Frum has met Bush and

worked with him as a speechwriter cuts a lot of ice with me, too. But what really matters are the results, which speak for themselves. Abraham Lincoln worked with another slow-spoken problem drinker, Ulysses Grant. Once, upon hearing his only successful general attacked as a lush, Lincoln wished out loud that every one of his generals had the same problem.

The idea that certain people in positions of great power are dull-witted serves a number of purposes. It reassures the intellectually insecure. It can explain away policy disagreements. It can serve as an equalizer, by which clever people with little power might assert their unrecognized superiority over those perhaps less clever but infinitely more able to command events. One can see how some in the Canadian political tribe might find such a notion comforting.

But a widespread Canadian condescension towards Bush is harder to fathom. Less so with the French and other Europeans, who have been looking down their noses intellectually at all Americans for centuries. They often find their American cousins boorish and uncultured, as one would expect of those condemned to scavenge the colonial wilderness for intellectual sustenance. But Canadians? What's our excuse?

Once upon a time — say, a century ago — when Canada was much more closely connected to the United Kingdom, one could perhaps make the argument that this retained link to the mother country gave Canadians some kind of intellectual edge over Americans. That superb chronicler of the anglo-Canadian psyche, Michael Bliss, once noted that the *beau idéal* to which a Canadian might aspire was to be “an English gentleman with American energy” (the final word best delivered with a half-smile). The severing of the British link long ago abolished this point of differentiation, but in its place arose a kind of moral superiority that really took flight during the Vietnam War.

Yet the new anti-Americanism we are experiencing today seems based on neither intellectual nor moral superiority. It is simply a ranting demand for acknowledgement, as in the famous “Joe Canadian” beer commercial, or a simple guttural growl: “I hate those bastards.” Compared with these comments, Francie Ducros’ “moron” remark seems the epitome of old-world intellectual swank.

It's hard to say what's more troubling: that Canadians engage in this kind of short-sighted and politically risky Yankee-bashing, or that our political discourse has become so barren that public meditation upon the all-important relationship with the United States is reduced to grunting. Over the past twenty years, Canadian politicians have systematically run down the quality of political discussion in this country.

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From Rat Pack tactics and “pipe down baby” in the 1980s, to today's Barney-the-Dinosaur brandishing and budget-by-infomercial, our political class has dumbed down too many multifaceted challenges, bypassed too many legitimate *fora*, shouted down too many reasonable voices. Most federal political arguments in the past decade have begun and ended with the crude assertion of the governing party's, or the prime minister's, raw popularity. The people have spoken; now you shut up.

It takes a toll. Without intelligent political debate, the governed cannot be expected to go along with the directives of the governors for long. Instead, they start to take the lead themselves, or from others. That's what happened in the second week of the Iraqi conflict, when Canadian opinion on participation in the war moved by 13 percent in a week. This very sizeable shift came

largely upon the intervention of US Ambassador Paul Cellucci, during a week when the government continued to defend its position mainly on the diminishing grounds that Canadians agreed with it. The people responded to a cogent argument. Imagine that.

The cause of this debasement of our political culture is not, as some might suggest, the dominance of a single party. It is possible to have reasonable, intelligent and useful political discourse even in a country where a single political party usually prevails. The British certainly have managed through long periods of Conservative hegemony. So have we, during the late nineteenth century under the Tories, and the long Liberal reigns of the King-St. Laurent and Pearson-Trudeau eras. Nor is the problem the times in which we live; lively and thoughtful debate is as robust in

America as ever (watch George Will and George Stephanopoulos of a Sunday), and in other countries as well. Much as it may pain readers of *Policy Options* (this one included) to admit it, the blame for the slippage in our political culture surely falls at our own doorstep.

The Canadian political class must stop narrowing, even silencing, substantive debate. More particularly, we must cease abusing those with whom we disagree with names like “moron.” To do so is to treat as imbeciles the people we serve, and submit ourselves, deservedly, to just that characterization. Frum's book reminds us that in politics, intelligence is as intelligence does. If a movement conservative intellectual like Frum can overcome initial scepticism and grow to respect Bush's leadership qualities, surely we broad-minded members of the Canadian policy community can do the same.

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