

By Amy Davidson

From [The New Yorker](#) | Original Article

“Just make up your mind,” Laura Bush told her husband. “You’re ruining this for everyone.” Which decision, of the many described in “Decision Points,” George W. Bush’s memoir—it comes out next week, but [Reuters](#) and the [Times](#) have copies—would that be about? On drinking, war, whether and how to respond to Katrina or the economic crisis? No—it’s about pardoning Scooter Libby, who had been convicted of various charges in the Valerie Plame case. Dick Cheney really wanted him to do it—“I can’t believe you’re going to leave a soldier on the battlefield”—Bush, for one reason or the other, couldn’t get his mind around it, though he did commute the sentence. He thought the incident might spoil his relationship with Cheney, but they’re on good terms now, for what that’s worth to anyone.

In an [interview with Matt Lauer](#), Bush describes himself as “a content man.” The emphasis is on the second syllable; Bush has plenty of contentment, but, based on what’s been released from the book so far, he comes across as remarkably content-free. What really seems to matter are his feelings, and what he takes his own intentions to be. For example, on Iraq’s absent weapons of mass destruction:

No one was more shocked or angry than I was when we didn’t find the weapons. I had a sickening feeling every time I thought about it. I still do.

When Lauer asked if he thought that his errors there were worthy of an apology, Bush said no:

I mean, apologizing would basically say the decision was a wrong decision... And I don’t believe it was the wrong decision.

Can everything about a decision be wrong, and the decision still be right? It is as though an impulse alone had a truth that didn't depend on its being anchored to the world. [Michiko Kakutani](#) notes that "several times in the book Mr. Bush uses the term 'blindsided' to describe his feelings about a crisis"—all sorts of crises. He seems to think that baffled surprise, on the part of a President, is somehow exculpatory. (It is not.)

That is why Bush says that one of the people he is most angry at is Kanye West, who both hurt and impugned his feelings by saying, in the wake of Katrina, that Bush didn't care about black people. Bush to Lauer:

It's one thing to say, 'I don't appreciate the way he's handled his business.' It's another thing to say, 'This man's a racist.' I resent it. It's not true. And it was one of the most disgusting moments in my presidency.

So how did he handle his "business"? After Katrina, "The problem was not that I made the wrong decisions. It was that I took too long to decide." And, again, the feelings:

I made an additional mistake by failing to adequately communicate my concern for the victims of Katrina. This was a problem of perception, not reality. My heart broke at the sight of helpless people trapped on their rooftops waiting to be rescued.

If your heart breaks, you must be an all right guy.

But it would be wrong to just call Bush a clumsy child, or to take his presentation of himself at face value. It may be appealing, to him and to us, to say that he doesn't think or is easily led or is a creature of instinct—but that temptation should be resisted. It's not enough; it lets him off too easily; it explains less than one thinks. For one thing, the emphasis on feeling is not the same as the absence of ideology. What tripped him up after Katrina? Worries about liberal sensibilities, apparently:

If I invoked the Insurrection Act against [Governor Kathleen Blanco's] wishes, the world would see a male Republican president usurping the authority of a female Democratic governor by declaring an insurrection in a largely African-American city. ... I was as frustrated as I had been at any point in my presidency.

If only lady governors liked strong Presidents.

There is more—Cheney telling him, regarding Saddam Hussein, “Are you going to take care of this guy, or not?”; the defense of Guantánamo based on the availability of “an Arabic translation of ‘Harry Potter’”—and I’ll return to the book when I’ve read more. The point that has gotten the most press so far is that Bush considered accepting an offer Cheney made to quit in 2003 or 2004, in part because of all the Darth Vader comparisons ([which are, I’d contend, flawed](#))—again, he driven by perceptions and feelings. But he didn’t let Cheney go. He also says he thought Donald Rumsfeld should be replaced, but just couldn’t find a good alternative. Then came a suggestion, and a flash:

“Why hadn’t I thought of Bob?”

That’s Robert Gates, who is now helping President Obama run the two wars that were strangely absent from the conversation surrounding this election. Bush himself was only half-present; his publisher delayed the book until after the “noisy” midterms. (See [Book Bench](#) for more on that.) The wars are very present in our soldiers’ lives, though—in all of our lives, drawing resources from other priorities, leaving moral scars. So, in his way, is Bush.