

THE ANNENBERG
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OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Kathleen Hall Jamieson on George Bush's Legacy

March 1, 2007 -- *Texas Monthly*, in its March issue (<http://www.texasmonthly.com/preview/2007-03-01/feature>), polled what it calls "15 of the smartest people in the room – presidential scholars, best-selling biographers and White House veterans of both parties," asking them about the legacy of George W. Bush and if "there is anything he can still do to change it."

Joining historian Douglas Brinkley, biographer Robert Caro, former Bush administration Commerce Secretary Donald L. Evans, and former Bill Clinton advisor Paul Begala in the survey is Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

Jamieson believes Bush's legacy will be his use of signing statements, the written documents presidents can issue when signing a bill into law.

"He has used them to replace the veto, which represents a shift in institutional power and alters the relationship between the branches," Jamieson told the magazine. "When a president doesn't issue a veto until the sixth year of his presidency but nonetheless systematically takes exception to the legislation, that person is doing something different from what his predecessors did. Some observers view this as a healthy exercise of executive power; others view it as overstepping. I'm in the second camp."

"What's new in this president's use is the displacement of the traditional veto for this alternative form."

Jamieson cites Sen. John McCain's 2005 proposal to ban the torture of detainees which passed with a veto-proof majority. President Bush had already made clear his administration's views on the matter. At a meeting with the press and McCain, he spoke positively about the plan. Two weeks later, when Bush signed the bill, he attached a signing statement that was posted on the White House Web site. In the statement, Bush reserved the right to nullify the provision over which McCain and Bush had fought. "He engaged in what I would call `public embrace, private repudiation,'" said Jamieson.

"...[H]ad Bush simply vetoed the bill, McCain would have had the votes to override it. That would have checked the president, as provided for in the Constitution.

“I think we will look back at this administration's decisions in fifty years the way we look at Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus. The signing statement is an assertion of presidential prerogative, and what makes it so intriguing is that it is largely an unaccountable power.

“We don't know when the war on terror is going to end. It could be like the Cold War; it could last a long time. If President Bush's successors continue to do this, it could be not simply an important legacy. It could be the most important legacy. It shifts your presumption of what presidents can do.”

Other assessments of the Bush legacy included in the *Texas Monthly* article:

Douglas Brinkley, Tulane University history professor who is currently editing Ronald Reagan's diaries:

“President Bush has hopes of being seen as Harry Truman. Truman has become the patron saint of failed presidents, because he left office with a 27 percent approval rating and people were saying, "To err is Truman," yet look at what he did: the Marshall Plan, the creation of NATO, the Truman Doctrine. The difference is that Harry Truman actually won a war, World War II, while Bush is losing one in Iraq. Bush is like a poker player who bet all his chips on Iraq, and it hasn't come out the way he wanted.”

Robert Caro, two-time Pulitzer Prize winner for biography:

“Is there anything that the president can do in the next two years to alter his legacy? Absolutely. Kennedy's entire presidency wasn't quite three years. Bush has about 700 days left. That's plenty of time to create a legacy that will have additional elements to it.”

Matthew Dowd, senior strategist in Bush's 2000 presidential bid and chief strategist in his 2004 re-election campaign:

“In the short term, historians will say George W. Bush missed some real opportunities in the aftermath of 9/11 to call the country to some shared sacrifice, to be a unifier, to bring people together and reestablish community....The problem is that his gut-level bond with the American public has been seriously damaged and maybe lost....

“How does he reestablish that gut connection he had with the American public? You can't do it through sales and marketing. This is a substantive problem that requires a substantive change. First, a tremendous sense of compromise and consensus building even if he has to sacrifice some of his principles along the way. Second, a resolution on Iraq that represents a significant shift in policy. Once you've lost the support of the public on the war, which is where we are today, sending in a small contingent of troops is likely going to be seen as not helpful. He'd be much better off with the public if he said, 'This is a mess, we made mistakes, and the only way to fix it is a wholesale change.' And that could mean either a serious increase in troop strength or withdrawal.”