Preaching to the conservatives?

George W. Bush’s spin on his presidency will be a tough sell to anyone not already convinced he was a successful leader

a kindred spirit “in the transformative power of liberty.”

He admits, as he rarely did while president, to a few mistakes. By flying over New Orleans to inspect the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina, Bush acknowledges, he fueled perceptions that he was detached from the people, many of them African-Americans, who were suffering on the ground. Instead, he should have spent time in Baton Rouge, the state’s capital, met with the governor and assured the victims “that their country stood with them.”

He indicates as well that he may have missed his reflection as a mandate to reform Social Security when, in fact, there was little support in Congress or in the country for his proposal to allow senior citizens to set up personal retirement accounts (and invest their money in the stock market). And he’s now convinced that immigration reform, not Social Security, should have been the first major legislative initiative of his second term.

On the “big ticket items,” however, Decision Points sticks with oft-repeated arguments and ignores information that might call them into question. Bush simply declares that warrantless wiretapping and “enhanced interrogation techniques,” including waterboarding, about which even his attorney-general expressed reservations, are legal and have saved lives. He does not address critics who fear retaliation against captured American soldiers or intelligence officers.

Bush denies that funding two wars and cutting taxes busted the federal budget. He asserts that his overturned “No Child Left Behind” education program and his Medicare prescription drug plan, which prohibited the government from negotiating price reductions with pharmaceutical companies, improved the lives of Americans while demonstrating the effectiveness of conservative principles of “accountability and market-based competition.” And he insists that the Great Recession was caused by a “relatively small group of people,” many of them on Wall Street, and not by “a lack of regulation by government.”

Bush is silent about whether he “dropped the ball” on Afghanistan when he decided to invade Iraq in 2003. Despite evidence that the corrupt regime of Hamid Karzai rigged the recent presidential contest, he claims that the country is “now governed by freely elected leaders.” Most importantly, he displays little more than faith in proclaiming that deploying more American troops will result in defeat for the Taliban and al-Qaida, the installation of a stable, legitimate and competent democracy in Kabul and greater security for the American people.

On Iraq, Bush admits that Saddam Hussein had no “weapons of mass destruction,” but defends his preemptive war. The lesson of 9/11 is that those who wait “for a danger to fully materialize” wait too long. Although the US reduced troop levels too quickly, he writes, with a certainty shared by few, “we adapted our strategy and fixed the problems.” His decision, he emphasizes, “changed the direction of the Middle East for generations.”

On the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, Bush sees “progress” and implies that his administration is, in no small measure, responsible for it. When he took office, he indicates, an intifada was raging. Arafat ran the Palestinian Authority, Israel’s leaders were committed to a “Greater Israel” and Arab nations complained from the sidelines. With his approval, Bush reveals, secretary of state Condoleezza Rice persuaded prime minister Ehud Olmert to offer to return much of the territory in the West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinians, allow a limited number of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel, establish Jerusalem as a “joint capital” and empanel a commission of nonpolitical elders to supervise holy sites.

Before the secret deal could be turned into a public agreement, however, Olmert was charged with corruption and forced to resign. Although negotiations ended, Bush claims, putting on his happy face, when he stepped down in January 2009, the Palestinians had a president and prime minister “who rejected terrorism,” Israel had withdrawn from settlements and endorsed a two-state solution, and Arab states were “playing an active role in the peace process.”

Acutely aware that these days his presidency is not held in high esteem, Bush reminds his readers that commentators who once dismissed Ronald Reagan “as a dunce and a warmonger” now praise “The Great Communicator” for winning the Cold War. He knows, no doubt, that he has already begun to benefit from disaffection with Barack Obama.

Like all ex-presidents, Bush is in the legacy business. Decision Points may help. But it will be a hard sell for anyone not already inclined to believe that he was a careful steward of his nation’s economy and that he used America’s influence and its military might, effectively and ethically, to enhance national security and advance freedom around the world.

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• GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

It is impossible, George W. Bush suggests, to reach “definitive conclusions” about any presidency until decades after the incumbent has left the White House. “Only history” can deliver “the verdict.”

Like his recent predecessors, however, the 43rd president of the United States has decided to give historians an assist by writing a memoir. In Decision Points, Bush emerges from a self-imposed absence from the limelight, reviews his domestic and foreign policy initiatives and assesses his relationships with world leaders. He presents (some will say “reinvents”) himself as a reflective man, who read 14 biographies of Abraham Lincoln and several monographs on the Middle East while in office. Confronted with terrorism, “the central challenge of our time,” Bush claims, he weighed his options, stayed true to his convictions “without wavering but changed his reflection as a mandate to reform Social Security when, in fact, there was little support in Congress or in the country for his proposal to allow senior citizens to set up personal retirement accounts (and invest their money in the stock market). And he’s now convinced that immigration reform, not Social Security, should have been the first major legislative initiative of his second term.

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