In a survey conducted by the History News Network in 2008, 98.2 percent of the historians who were polled deemed the presidency of George W. Bush a failure; 61 percent considered Bush 43 the worst president in American history.
Mindful perhaps of the “Truman Consolation” (unpopular when he left office, Truman was subsequently regarded as a very fine president), W. declared that “History will judge … and I’m not going to be around to see the final verdict.”

In “Bush,” Jean Edward Smith, an emeritus professor of political economy at the University of Toronto and the author of biographies of Ulysses S. Grant, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower, makes a voluminously detailed — and compelling — case that vindication is unlikely to come for the Bush administration anytime soon.

Bush may not have been our nation’s worst president, Smith concludes. His decisions to rescue Wall Street and the automobile industry probably prevented a repeat of the Great Depression. And his leadership of the global fight against AIDS saved millions of lives.

However, according to Smith, Bush ignored warnings of a possible terrorist attack, overreacted to 9/11, violated the constitutional right to privacy of American citizens and approved the torture of prisoners. While Roosevelt “banished the nation’s fears,” Bush “reinforced them.” His decision to authorize a preemptive war against Iraq, based on flimsy evidence that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, and occupy the country, Smith writes, “is easily the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American president.”

Smith demonstrates that Bush “was unwilling to master the details of complex issues, prone to see the world in black and white terms, and convinced that he was the instrument of God’s will.” The president preferred to let his subordinates thrash things out, reach a consensus on a solution and present it to him. Although he saw himself as the (macho) “decider,” he did not encourage or want a robust discussion of alternatives.

This mind-set, which allowed Vice President Dick Cheney to exert enormous influence, was a prescription for disaster. Reacting viscerally to 9/11 and to claims by Paul Wolfowitz and other neoconservatives that Iraq was somehow involved in the attack, Bush proclaimed, “I don’t care what the international lawyers say, we are going to kick some ass” and launched
two major wars against “the evildoers of the Muslim world.”

Without consulting Secretary of State Colin Powell or Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, he ordered an indefinite occupation of Iraq (to replace the previously agreed-upon plan for a rapid transition to self-rule and withdrawal of American armed forces), setting in motion sectarian strife, violence and the rise of the Islamic State.

According to Smith, Bush’s Second Inaugural Address, in which he abandoned the pursuit of international stability to embark on a quixotic quest to export democracy (through nation building), “must rank as one of the most ill-considered of all time.”

Bush’s inattention to detail, his tendency to delegate and his preoccupation with Iraq, Smith implies, also contributed to domestic policy mistakes. His administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina was too little, too late. The president’s “jovial, bordering on flippant” comments throughout the crisis suggested that “he lived in a world of make believe.”

Like his initial response to Katrina, Smith indicates, Bush also ignored warnings and watched the subprime mortgage crisis unfold without taking corrective action.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Smith may well give Bush too much credit for his domestic policies. He does not mention the serious and substantive criticisms of the president’s No Child Left Behind “teach to the test” educational initiative. Or his failure to support a provision authorizing the government to negotiate prices with pharmaceutical companies in his prescription drug plan for seniors. Or the deficits generated by his tax cuts.

Even more important, Smith credits the president for handling the Great Recession “remarkably well.” In trusting the judgment of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson and Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke, adopting policies that ran counter to his free-market ideology and were opposed by Republicans in the House and Senate, he writes, Bush exhibited courage and statesmanship. His actions may, indeed, have restored enough confidence in stock markets to prevent a depression.

Smith is silent, however, on the flaws in the Troubled Asset Relief Program, which provided massive assistance to (“too big to fail”) financial institutions and left millions of underwater mortgage holders (and other borrowers) to fend for themselves.
Bush does not appear to miss being president. And, he told USA Today in 2013, he feels no need to defend himself or his administration: “I did what I did and ultimately history will be the judge.” Bush, we now know, is an avid reader. One wonders whether he will peruse Jean Edward Smith’s well-documented, unflattering indictment, and what this remarkably unreflective man will make of it.

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Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. Email: books@sfchronicle.com

**Bush**

By Jean Edward Smith

Simon & Schuster; 808 pages; $35)