

Bush Ethics

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It's Thursday morning as I write this column while trying to listen to President Bush's press conference.

Bush is asked about whether he will finally get to the bottom of the death of Pat Tillman from "friendly fire," a gruesome, doublespeak oxymoron if there ever was one.

Bush evades the question. There are people investigating, he says.

No leadership here, I think.

A reporter asks about increasing the federal gasoline tax by five cents to pay for bridge repairs, this after the bellwether collapse of the eight-lane Interstate 35W bridge in Minnesota. Nationally there are some 500 bridges like the one in Minnesota, the reporter says.

Bush bobs and weaves around the rusting infrastructure sword by claiming that Congress needs to get its priorities straight before we threaten our economic development by raising taxes.

I get mad. No leadership anywhere.

It's only a couple questions into the conference, and I'm jumping around the kitchen in my pajamas yelling at the radio.

My wife comes down and gives me that same look she has been giving me for 34 years.

I turn the radio off, mad as hell and not wanting to take it anymore. I sit down at the computer, stare at the screen, my



President George W. Bush reads over a draft of his State of the Union speech in the Oval Office

fingers at the ready. I sigh.

Bush gets an A for cause-effect segues, certainly, for he began the conference by waxing rhapsodically about how his tax cuts were responsible for our economic growth post the 2000 stock-market crash that worsened after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. But Bush gets an F for ethics, which is why I'm mad.

The only thing that being mad and not wanting to take it anymore is going to do for me, however, is give me an upset stomach. I need something more, some better way to analyze the harm this president is doing to our country, which brings me back to RSVP.

[Last week](#) I wrote about RSVP ethics, which has nothing at all to do with responding, if it pleases you, to an invitation. No, RSVP ethics is a mnemonic that stands for Rules, Sympathy, Virtue and Piety, the foundation of moral behavior.

Rules is a process that derives from Kant's categorical imperative to treat others as ends, never only as means. This solves the self-centered problem posed by the golden rule, treat others as you want them to treat you, by forcing us to consider the other person's perspective. If I trick you into believing that tax cuts no matter the reason are good for you, as Bush does, then the president is using our greed, which clouds our judgment, as a means to his ends, which is to increase his political power.

To avoid using someone else as a means to our ends, we must recognize that a moral equivalency applies independent of position in life. If I do something to justify an act, then you can do it too. But if something impugns my behavior, then the same is true of you. The ethical strength of America is based on this idea -- in part it's what we mean when we say all men, now humans, are created equal -- which is why Bush's pardoning of Scooter Libby was such an unethical act. (Yeah, it's true. Other presidents did the same ugly thing, but ethics isn't improved by copycat morals. Here I'm talking about Bush.)

We also need to recognize that rights are to be respected provided obligations are fulfilled and agreements honored.

When Pat Tillman joined the army, his right to a fair and objective hearing after his death was absolute. He behaved honorably, he fulfilled his obligations to his country, and he honored his agreement to fight and die for us. He did everything and more that an ethical member of society does, which is why our obligation to him must be to honor his sacrifice by investigating objectively, without consideration of others' careers or station in life, what really happened. When Bush does not do this, he breaks the moral code, the Rules, and forfeits his own rights because, as moral equality demands, we stand alike on the ethical plain.

But we extend the moral codes, which can be too rigid, with Sympathy. While we have sympathy for the Tillman family's loss, we also may have sympathy for President Bush. He works out a lot. He's in good shape. He cracks jokes. And if we were to meet him someplace where we could sit and talk, just the few of us, we'd probably discover that he's not the man he appears to be in public.

Bush is a father. He seems like a good husband. And the Democrats and media have relentlessly criticized him. He's in a tight spot. Maybe we even like him. So perhaps because of the sympathy we feel, we should give President Bush a pass on Tillman. But does Bush feel enough sympathy for the Tillman family to do the right thing?

This is where Virtue, critical to RSVP ethics, comes in. Virtue is what we practice even when no one is looking. The virtuous person, a prime example being Pat Tillman, gives up something for the greater good. He makes sacrifices by joining the Army when he could have been a professional football player. Tillman wanted to serve his country after 9/11. He, like many others, made the ultimate sacrifice for us.

But Bush has not acted virtuously. After 9/11 Bush could have acted virtuously by increasing taxes, political cost be damned, to pay for the fight against terrorism, by encouraging his own daughters and the children of his colleagues to join the fight in Afghanistan, by working out less in the gym and more, tirelessly more, with our international allies to find a solution in Iraq that didn't involve war.


Bush could have done these things, but he didn't. Instead he encouraged us to shop to prove to the terrorists that they hadn't won. To help us shop, he reduced our taxes and dramatically increased our national debt.

Worst of all, Bush is a religious man who doesn't practice Piety, the fourth component of RSVP ethics. Piety acknowledges that we are born into a world that existed before us and that will continue to exist after we're gone. Piety respects and learns from the best that diverse cultures have to offer and understands the damage done to individual rights when cultures are labeled evil empires, which Bush has done, and when people are called bad guys, which Bush has said.

Piety respects the tradition of law and doesn't circumvent it because it fears terrorists, for a pious person knows how fragile cultures are and how corrupt they can quickly become if respect for law is replaced with fear, which Bush too often seems to feel. And while Piety is enriched by Christian charity, it is damaged when Christian values are used like cudgels to attack scientific reason, namely evolutionary and climate science, and same-sex relationships, both of which Bush and his supporters have done.

So here I sit still in my pajamas. Now it's almost noon. I'm a slow writer. My brain's getting older every day. I examined Bush's ethics because I needed a specific example of how RSVP ethics might be applied. I had thought I would write about healthcare or poverty or abortion, but then I got mad. RSVP helped. It gave me a framework I could use to examine one man's ethics.

Except that this one man, who is supposed to be a master of democracy, the leader of the free world, a beacon of hope to those who seek freedom and understanding, turns out to be an unethical man, a proponent of bush ethics. Now I'm not mad -- I'm just profoundly sad.



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