

Dubya's half-billion tower of Babel

by *Bill Berkowitz*

President's 'truest believers' plan mother of all presidential libraries and conservative think tanks

After six years of incompetence and cronyism, a failed war against terrorism, the quagmire that is Iraq, wars against science, the environment, corporate regulation and the public's right-to-know, a chummy working relationship with the country's most reactionary conservative evangelical Christians, a politicized faith-based initiative, giveaways to the energy industry, tax relief for the wealthy, a culture of corruption culminating in the forced resignations and imprisonment of some of the administrations key soldiers, and an attack on fundamental democratic rights and values, the Bush Administration is hatching plans to celebrate itself with a \$500 million library (the costliest presidential library ever) to be built after Bush's second term is over.

In what is being called "their final campaign," Bush's "truest believers" are aiming to raise a half-billion dollars for the mother of all presidential libraries. The library and an attached think tank -- which will pay for conservative research -- is being earmarked for the Dallas, Texas campus of Southern Methodist University, where First Lady Laura Bush is an alumna and a trustee.

Inside Higher Ed recently pointed out that SMU, which had been competing for the library with Baylor University and the University of Dallas, appears to have cleared the final hurdle to getting the project when the university "won a court fight over its right to demolish a condo complex the university had purchased, in part to have land for the Bush project."

That was before university faculty, administration, and staff questioned the ideological underpinnings of the project.

Bringing back the Pioneers

In late-November, the New York Daily News reported that "Bush sources with direct knowledge of library plans" said that "Bush fund-raisers hope to get half of the half billion from what they call 'megadonations' of \$10 million to \$20 million a pop." According to the Daily News, "Bush loyalists have already identified wealthy heiresses, Arab nations and captains of industry as potential 'mega' donors and are pressing for a formal site announcement - now expected early in the new year The rest of the cash will come from donors willing to pony up \$25,000 to \$5 million."

(While the donors to Bush 43's library will remain anonymous, in February 2006, the Associated Press reported that among the donors to Papa Bush's presidential library located at Texas A&M University in College Station were a sheik from the United Arab Emirates, who contributed at least \$1 million, the state of

Kuwait, the Bandar bin Sultan family, the Sultanate of Oman, King Hassan II of Morocco, the amir of Qatar, and the former Korean prime minister. China also gave tens of thousands of dollars to the library. In addition, funds were received from the late Kenneth Lay, the former head of Enron, and Dick Cheney, the current Vice President.)

"Presidential libraries," the Daily News pointed out, "are run by the National Archives and Records Administration, but building costs must come from private donations. Bells and whistles, like an institute or an academic program like Bush's father's public service school at Texas A&M, are also extras."

The really big extra embedded into this project appears to be what Bush insiders are calling the Institute for Democracy. Modeled after the Hoover Institution, a long-time conservative think tank located on the campus of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, Bush's institute operation would hire conservative scholars and "give them money to write papers and books favorable to the President's policies," one Bush insider told the Daily News. This would be the post-administration version of a policy they established during his reign; paying columnists to advocate for administration policy.

According to the newspaper, "The half-billion target is double what Bush raised for his 2004 reelection and dwarfs the funding of other presidential libraries. But Bush partisans are determined to have a massive pile of endowment cash to spread the gospel of a presidency that for now gets poor marks from many scholars and a majority of Americans."

While it may seem counterintuitive, it isn't all that surprising that while Bush's popularity continues to plummet, and his administration's policies gain no traction with the American people, his handlers would already be hatching the mother of all redemption plans. Perhaps Bush's close advisors are hoping that Bush won't have to spend his entire post-presidency trying to rebuild his standing amongst the American people and history a la Richard Nixon.

However, as with many of the Bush Administration's grand ventures, this one too appears to be running into opposition; the SMU faculty, administrators and staff -- a group that former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld might call "dead enders."

According to Inside Higher Ed, "Faculty critics say that although many of them disagree with President Bush's policies, they would not object to a library-oriented archive and museum ... and they say that in discussions with professors, the university has discussed a vision for such a Bush center. But creating an academic center with a specific goal of boosting the Bush image and agenda strikes many professors as antithetical to a university's academic values."

In a letter dated December 16 and addressed to R. Gerald Turner, president of the Board of Trustees, members of SMU's Perkins School of Theology urged the board to "reconsider and to rescind SMU's pursuit

of the presidential library."

We count ourselves among those who would regret to see SMU enshrine attitudes and actions widely deemed as ethically egregious: degradation of habeas corpus, outright denial of global warming, flagrant disregard for international treaties, alienation of long-term U.S. allies, environmental predation, shameful disrespect for gay persons and their rights, a pre-emptive war based on false and misleading premises, and a host of other erosions of respect for the global human community and for this good Earth on which our flourishing depends.

Another matter that warrants our attention is that whether it aims to or not SMU will, in the long run, financially profit on the backs of hard-working Americans who feel squashed by policies they've now rejected at the polls. Surely it's not the case that SMU will allow itself to benefit financially from a name and legacy that globally is associated with suffering, death, and political 'bad faith.' Taken together, all these issues set decision-making about the Library in a framework of inescapable ethical questions, and remind us of a key imperative adopted by many leading universities around the globe: 'to be critic and conscience of society.'"

"The letter doesn't call for the university to withdraw from the competition, but to have a full discussion of the library's goals ... with the clear implication that the university must agree to be host only to a library without an agenda," Inside Higher Ed reported.

At this point, "critics of the library plans are trying hard to frame the question as about academic standards for open research and debate, not about Bush-bashing," Inside Higher Ed pointed out. Suzanne Johnson, an associate professor of Christian education, said that she would understand the value of an archive of the Bush administration, and sees how many SMU scholars would benefit from having such a collection on campus. But she said that the campus has been left 'uninformed and naive' about President Bush's plans to create a policy center to promote his view of the world." Johnson was also concerned about the fact that SMU "historically has had a reputation for attracting wealthy students ... a reputation that the university has tried to fight in recent years by offering generous scholarship to low-income students. 'I think it might be a setback in terms of trying to attract a different constituency among students,' Johnson said. 'Children of wealthy, leading Republicans in this state come to SMU, and then they are groomed here to become Republican leaders in all sectors of society. We shouldn't be in the business of just replicating Republicans.'"

Ironically, the fundraising push for Bush's library comes at the same time many Americans have digested and are debating the substance of Sean Wilentz's provocative May 4, 2006 Rolling Stone piece titled "The Worst President in History." Wilentz wrote that Bush's presidency "appears headed for colossal historical disgrace. Barring a cataclysmic event on the order of the terrorist attacks of September 11 ... there seems to be little the administration can do to avoid being ranked on the lowest tier of U.S. presidents. And that may be the best-case scenario. Many historians are now wondering whether Bush, in fact, will be remembered as the very worst president in history."

Wilentz, the Dayton-Stockton Professor of History and director of the Program for American Studies at

Princeton University, is not alone in his assessment of Bush. According to an informal survey of 415 historians -- conducted in 2004 by the nonpartisan History News Network -- 81 percent considered the Bush Administration a "failure."

News of the Bush library has also begun to hit the late-night television talk circuit: Noting that the president's team was aiming to raise \$500 million for the project, Conan O'Brien pointed out that would "work out to \$100 million a book." Other talk show hosts, political commentators and comedians will no doubt find both the humor and outrage in this chutzphatic project. However strange as it may seem now, you can be certain that the money will be raised and the monument will be built. Where it will be situated still remains in question.

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