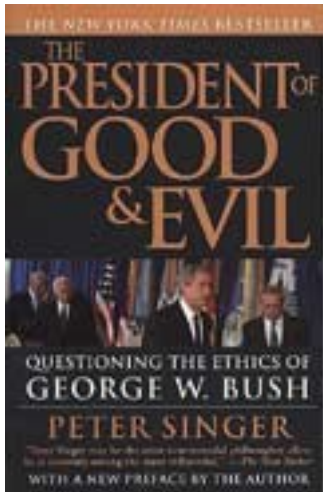


THE PREIDENT OF GOOD&EVIL



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著者:Peter Singer

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The New York Times bestseller book every American should read before voting in the 2004 elections

More than any president in recent memory, George W. Bush invokes the language of good versus evil and right versus wrong. Here, world-renowned Princeton University professor of ethics Peter Singer shines a spotlight on Bush, analyzing whether or not he has lived up to the values he so often touts in his presidential prose. Called "timely and searching," by the Washington Post, this accessible look at the president reveals his pattern of ethical confusion and self-contradiction, and his moral failure on dozens of hot-button issues. Labeled a "generous critic" by the New York Times, Singer advances devastating arguments that make this the book to give to anyone thinking of voting for George W. Bush in November 2004.

"George W. Bush has met his match. This is a chilling and powerful intellectual indictment of an administration desperate to cover up the damage it inflicts."

- David Corn, author of *The Lies of George W. Bush* and Washington editor of *The Nation*

"Even Bush supporters will have to admit that, in an age of diatribe, this book elevates the level of political discourse. The more American voters who read it, the better."

- Robert Wright, author of *Nonzero* and *The Moral Animal*

"Mr. Singer's influence extends to the world beyond the ivory tower partly because he writes with such lucidity and quiet passion about genuinely pressing issues."

- *The Economist*

This book by controversial ethicist Singer (a founder of the animal rights movement) is both broader and narrower than it purports to be. It offers a look at almost every significant policy the administration has taken a position on yet offers little in the way of new philosophic inquiry. Singer pits Bush's rhetoric and prescriptions against his actions, going from the topical (terror detainees, the war in Iraq) to the abstract (utilitarian theories of government). Singer's arguments are often reasonable and well documented: he asks whether an administration that emphasizes smaller government should be intervening in state right-to-die cases and whether someone so vocal about the value of individual merit should be rewarding birthright by eliminating the estate tax. But anyone who has followed recent critiques of the administration would learn nothing new from these familiar arguments and conclusions, such as that the justification for the Iraq war might have been problematic. Singer's logic can also be mushy. A chapter that decries the influence of religion on Bush's policy dissolves into vague, emotional language better suited to a TV pundit than a philosopher. Singer's most intellectually adventurous chapter involves stem-cell research, where the author exposes fissures in Bush's "compromise" to allow research on existing stem-cell lines. But mostly Singer's critique does little to distinguish itself from other anti-Bush books.

A president's vocabulary of moral judgment comes in for harsh scrutiny from a prominent ethicist. Whether examining the rhetoric with which Bush has explained the war against terrorism or parsing the justifications the president has marshaled to cut taxes and restrict stem-cell research, Singer identifies inconsistencies in ethical reasoning. Repeatedly, Singer accuses Bush of relying on moral terms that reflect only raw intuition, not systematic reflection. But in indicting Bush for an imperialistic foreign policy and for an incoherently religious domestic agenda, Singer must also criticize media commentators who have supported the president and a popular culture that has echoed his slogans. Readers who find their own views under attack may complain of authorial bias, especially since Singer's leftist premises guarantee a negative evaluation of almost any Republican. More cynical readers may question Singer's expectation of theoretical rigor in the real-world maneuvering of a politician from any party. In any case, the ideological controversy that Singer's critique will spark should only intensify public interest in this book.

Bryce Christensen

No doubt it would be a good thing if all presidents were required to pass a course in moral philosophy before taking office. There they would learn about rights-based moral systems, utilitarianism, conflicts of moral principles, the Golden Rule, the nature of virtue, the principles of justice, the relationship between morality and religion, and so on. Given that a president must make policy decisions in which these concepts are critical -- for example, on stem cell research -- it would help to have some articulate

awareness of what they involve and how to apply them.

It seems safe to assume that George W. Bush has never taken such a course and has no intention of doing so. Yet he came to office powered by moral rhetoric to a degree unusual in politics. There was much talk of restoring honor to the White House, of compassion, of the evils of poverty and injustice, of humility on the world stage -- and latterly of good and evil. This was to be an administration shaped by moral principle, decency and honesty.

The President of Good & Evil, Peter Singer's timely and searching new book, is in effect an ethics tutorial directed toward the leader of the "free world." Singer, professor of bioethics at Princeton University, gives Bush a D, if not an outright fail. The bulk of the book is a litany of moral inconsistencies and failures, of persistent hypocrisy and doublethink. Singer's method is to contrast Bush's enunciations of principle with the realities of his policies, finding repeatedly that political expediency triumphs over declarations of principle. The list is by now familiar, but worth assembling. Bush began his presidency lamenting the injustice of children born to poverty and disadvantage: "And this is my solemn pledge: I will work to build a single nation of justice and opportunity." Yet his enormous cuts in taxation clearly entail the withdrawal of resources from social programs that would help ameliorate such problems.

His position on stem cell research, which stressed the absolute sanctity of life, even in the form of frozen embryos, sits ill with his cavalier attitude toward capital punishment, in which innocent people are not infrequently sent to their death, and with his ready acceptance of "collateral" civilian casualties in time of war. The protection of the legal rights of American citizens abroad who are accused of crimes, even to the point of rejecting the legitimacy of the International Criminal Court, is flatly inconsistent with the policy of detaining terrorist suspects for long periods without access to a lawyer and without being charged -- not to mention the use of coercive techniques of interrogation (i.e., torture). Free trade is extolled, but then massive subsidies are handed out to the farming industry, with catastrophic effects on struggling farmers in the developing world, and prohibitive tariffs slapped on the import of foreign steel. States' rights are to be respected, except when gay marriage is at issue. America is hymned for its personal freedom, but people are not free to engage in physician-assisted suicide in cases of terminal illness, and the medical use of marijuana is prohibited. Lying about your sex life is excoriated, but systematic dishonesty about the reasons for going to war is taken to be morally above board -- as, notoriously, with the now discredited claim that Iraq was seeking uranium from Africa, about which Singer has a particularly acute discussion.

Singer makes these points carefully and effectively, with full documentation. None of this, however, is particularly new or rises above the level of conscientious journalism; indeed, most of it is based on newspaper reports. Where the book strikes a fresh note is in the last chapter, which tries to penetrate to the heart of the Bush moral outlook. His policies show that he is neither a believer in the inviolability of individual rights nor a consistent utilitarian. Nor can the teachings of Christianity be used to support his various positions, since these can be interpreted in several ways, and many of his policies have no biblical basis. Singer suggests, plausibly and scarily, that a brand of Manichaeism best represents his religious outlook -- the idea of a force of evil in the world, with an apocalyptic Second Coming imminent and America as the divinely appointed nation set to destroy the forces of Satan.

But when it comes to his actual moral views, it seems to be a matter of what the Bush gut has to report today, as the president himself admits. Hence his tendency to adopt

conflicting moral positions and an unwillingness to consider how the conflicts might be resolved; he finds it hard to see why he can't have it both ways. Singer speculates that the president might well be stuck at what the developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg called the level of conventional morality, characteristic of teenagers, in which simple moral rules constitute one's moral outlook, and the idea that such rules might conflict hasn't sunk in (as the rules "Don't lie" and "Don't cause harm" can conflict if a murderer asks you the whereabouts of his next victim). Bush does seem sincere enough in his moral opinions, contrary to an entirely cynical interpretation of his words and actions, but there is an impression of callow simple-mindedness in his moral sentiments; at the least, he has not thought through the complexities of the issues he is called upon to deal with.

The conventional view of George W. Bush is that, while he is a man of marked intellectual limitations, he is governed by a consistent set of deeply held moral convictions. Singer's book refutes this comforting myth. Bush is a man of sporadically good moral instincts, perhaps, as with his AIDS initiative, but he sways inconsistently and opportunistically in the political breeze, and has no idea how to make his beliefs fit coherently together.

Reviewed by Colin McGinn

PETER SINGER'S many books include Practical Ethics; the classic Animal Liberation; and Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna. He is a professor of bioethics at Princeton University's Center for Human Values.

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作者介绍:

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