

*Reflections: Life After the White House.* By Barbara Bush. New York: Scribner's, 2003, 432 pages.

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In her latest book, *Reflections: Life After the White House*, Barbara Bush provides the opening Republican salvo in the battle with Democrats to win the 2004 presidential election. Although the book has the appearance of a family holiday letter or a small town newspaper column replete with descriptions of the latest family travels, favorite recipes, book suggestions, and family pictures, there are reminders of her husband's and sons' political accomplishments, praise for past and future campaign donors, and preemptive strikes against Bush family critics.

The conventional wisdom about the book is that it covers less ground than her previous memoirs, and contains fewer noteworthy revelations. While these observations are accurate, it is remiss to minimize an important overriding theme of the book: well-heeled tradition matters in American politics. The book is innocuous enough and mostly describes the endless number of family visitors and fundraisers the former president and Barbara participated in during the eight years of the Clinton administration. However, what will stick out to most Twenty-first Century readers is Mrs. Bush's frustrating acceptance of her accommodating status as wife and mother of two presidents.

Barbara Bush is a product of an earlier generation, and that fact is glaring throughout her most recent book. In the first chapter, she remarks, "So many great things have happened because I married well." She consistently subordinates her own accomplishments, confessing that her success stems from her marital and maternal status. Her view of the world is wrought with gender stereotypes, evidenced by the fact that even though she makes many political observations, she feels the need to include family recipes in every chapter of the book. Mrs. Bush relishes in her role as a supportive spouse, and praises other women (such as her daughter-in-law Laura) who follow in her footsteps. She manages to praise Hillary Clinton near the end of the book, but not after taking a jab at her participation at the Women's Conference in Beijing. At another point in the book, in the midst of discussing George W's run for the Texas governorship in 1994, Barbara observes that it is "hard to debate a woman if you're a man" running for political office. Mrs. Bush's one-sided sympathy for male political candidates is slightly disconcerting, and we must wonder what she thinks is the remedy for such a problem.

At least part of the explanation for why the book adopts such a traditionalist tone is its targeted readership. It is evident that Mrs. Bush wrote the second installation of her memoirs for women who share many of her life experiences as an obliging wife and stay-at-home mother. It is unlikely that many contemporary women in their twenties and thirties will find much in common with Mrs. Bush. After her husband's defeat in 1992, Mrs. Bush was faced with the prospect of hitting the speaking tour to generate some cash flow. She confesses that, "Everyone knew I had never earned any money, as I had never seriously worked in the 48 years we had been married. So besides losing the election, now at 68 I was going to have to

work?" At another point, Mrs. Bush writes about finishing her first autobiography, and describes her two-week spa retreat to finish up the project with her editor. In other words, this is not an autobiography written to inspire the female working class or struggling authors. It may not be ludicrous to suggest that Mrs. Bush's granddaughters might find more of a kinship with Hillary Clinton's *Living History* than their own matriarch's musings.

For those who admire the candor of the "Silver Fox," *Reflections* does not disappoint. Mrs. Bush lives up to her reputation as a quick-witted, opinionated political observer, and no one is absolved from scrutiny. One of the harshest condemnations is her disdain for former White House staffer David Gergen. Mrs. Bush recalls that Gergen abandoned the Bush campaign in 1980 after it became clear that her husband would not win the GOP nomination. After the 1992 election, the lifelong Republican Gergen admitted that he voted for Clinton rather than Bush. In an anecdote, Mrs. Bush recalls that she and Gergen were both being considered for a paid speaking engagement, and Gergen ultimately got the gig because his fee was less than hers. Mrs. Bush commented wryly that if given the opportunity, she would have given the speech "for free." Of course, Gergen's decisions were partially strategic. In politics, one follows the action. But the broader lesson we learn about the Bush clan is clear: loyalty is paramount, and no one forgets transgressions. She describes Bush family critic and *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd as sounding bitter, clever, and straining to be different when she snidely attacks the president. Further she states that *Vanity Fair* writer Gail Sheehy's criticism of family friend Elizabeth Dole is well written, very ugly, and filled with half-truths.

Mrs. Bush's book does not reveal any family tensions. She notes that, "If ever again a minister asks those of us who have perfect families to please raise their hands, mine will go up in a minute." She praises every family member and every family interaction. The descriptions of family members are superficial. She notes, "Laura Bush continues to be George's greatest asset. She had on a heavenly lavender suit with the tiniest fringe and covered by a truly beautifully fitted lavender coat." Mrs. Bush's role as wife and mother of a president and the continuous presence of Secret Service agents creates a world of seeing most people on their best behavior. She comments to her neighbors, "I don't find this or that person difficult." They answer, "Of course – nice to YOU." In the end, the book provides an escape into a world of luxury and blissful family gatherings and replaces the Kennedy family myth of Camelot with the Bush family myth of compassionate conservatism.