



# Return to Grace

by Jonathan Aitken

**T**HE GEORGE W. BUSH presidency has found its Samuel Pepys.

This chronicler is Timothy S. Goeglein, who, by his own endearingly modest account, was neither particularly senior nor influential in the administration's pecking order. His career trajectory was limited, ending in tears when he had to resign over a plagiarism scandal. But he kept his records and he knows how to write.

Sometimes it is the unobtrusive observers of White House life who provide the freshest insights into a president's character. Goeglein was a West Wing insider for seven years. He worked as Karl Rove's assistant and deputy director of the Office of Public Liaison—the underestimated switchboard where faith and politics get connected.

From this vantage point Goeglein gives an account that reveals much that is new about the 43rd president. The author's own fall from grace forms a complementary story from the viewpoint of a zealous fellow conservative and occasional presidential prayer partner who passed through fires of failure and humiliation on his road back to redemption.

Goeglein was caught red-handed as a serial plagiarizer in the columns he was writing for his Indiana hometown newspaper. He immediately resigned from the administration, never expecting to see George W. Bush again.

But behind the public departure came private forgiveness. Summoned to the Oval Office for what he expected to be “a woodshed moment,” Goeglein



was welcomed by President Bush with the words “Tim, I have known mercy and grace in my own life and I am offering it to you now....I want you to know that you are forgiven.”

Seating his guest in the chair of honor by the fireplace usually reserved for visiting heads of state, the president talked and prayed for 20 minutes with his prodigal aide. A few days later Goeglein was invited back to the White House with his wife and two young sons for a second session of presidential sympathy. “The grace he showed me upon that exit was a reflection of his faith in Jesus Christ,” writes Goeglein, whose journey toward healing

and peace began soon afterward.

Not all powerful leaders walk their talk. One of the most attractive features of his memoir, *The Man in the Middle: An Inside Account of Faith and Politics in the George W. Bush Era* (B&H Books), is the intimate portrait Goeglein paints of his president as a man of genuine humility and deep spiritual commitment. This is so different from the cynical and often rather shallow media image of George W. that the question will be asked: Is this revisionism for real?

Reality looks different from the inside track of power. This book is a chronicle of glimpses and episodes. It is not a comprehensive history of the Bush years. But when Goeglein is up close to the action he sees clearly. Some of his best insights are about family-related issues on which he rightly rates his

boss as a high achiever. For example, the account of the stem-cell research policy shows the president to have been intellectually, morally, and workaholically engaged in the decision-making process, deeply involved in finding what he believed to be the right balance between medical necessities and his own pro-life instincts.

Tim Goeglein is himself staunchly pro-life, an issue of pivotal but neuralgic importance when securing support for presidential nominees to the Supreme Court. Three of this book's most riveting chapters tell the inside story of how the White House team fought for Bush's two successful (John Roberts and Samuel Alito) and one unsuccessful (Harriet Miers) court nominations. This was a saga that began when Goeglein was, by several hours, the first presidential staffer to know, after being tipped off by a family friend, that Chief Justice Rehnquist had passed away.

At the start of the third of these nomination battles, Karl Rove came out of the Oval Office to say to his aide, "Your folks are going to love this choice." It was a telling phrase when applied to the president's selection of Samuel Alito. Yet Goeglein's "folks" were a somewhat more complicated mosaic of interest groups than the label implies. Ever since its creation by Charles Colson and Richard Nixon in 1970, the White House Office of Public Liaison has reached out to a broader constituency than one-size-fits-all conservatism. Goeglein uses the title "values voters" to define the coalition he courted. This courtship worked seven years ago, but as we enter the 2011–12 season of presidential campaigning with new standard-bearers like Romney, Bachmann, and Perry, it is not yet clear whose values will be victorious.

The Bush reelection team in 2004 had the advantages of incumbency, a weak opponent, and clarity of presentation. Goeglein's account of how these strengths prevailed on his watch is perhaps too simplistic and sweeping. Some of his claims such as "values voters care deeply about HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, international sex trafficking and human rights in foreign countries" seem overblown. So what did really play in Peoria the last time a Republican won the presidential election? And what

can we learn about it from the engine room of the Office of Public Liaison as presented in the chapter "Getting Out the Values Voters"?

**T**IM GOEGLIN WORKS HARD to persuade his readers that George W. Bush was a good president. Opinions on this will differ. But where this account really succeeds is in allowing Bush to emerge as a good man. He comes over as thoroughly decent and devout. He never dissembles. He has an exemplary family life. His prayerful faith is sincere. He may have delegated too much on economic issues but he delivered on his own highest priority, which was strengthening America in the prevention of terrorism at home.

These qualities may well have helped to bring out the values voters. Like many of his former targets, Goeglein responds instinctively to George W. Bush's virtues even though he can be myopic about his hero's faults. But the author evidently feels, as the biographer of Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone said of his subject: "It was the character breathing through the sentences that counted."

Tim Goeglein's own character was found wanting for a while. But he recovered his own moral conscience, which is also, in Barry Goldwater's phrase, the conscience of a conservative. The political principles of the author's credo, explained in the final chapters, would be applauded by any gathering of *TAS* readers. So would his attractive portraits of his role models such as Bill Buckley and Margaret Thatcher.

As a friend and fellow faller from political grace, I admire the comeback Tim Goeglein has made. I also like his fervent loyalty to the 43rd president. He comes out of these pages so well and in such a sharp contrast to the assessments of most liberal journalists that on the stock market of history George W. Bush shares look to be a good buy. ❁

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**Jonathan Aitken**, *The American Spectator's High Spirits columnist*, is most recently author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace (Crossway Books)*. His biographies include *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday)* and *Nixon: A Life*, now available in a new paperback edition (*Regnery*).

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