Chapter Six
The Bush Redemption

“Would you like me to run as Sam Smith? The problem is I can’t abandon my background.”

—George W. Bush in 1978 during his first political campaign.

To introduce himself to the nation and the world as a presidential candidate in 2000, George W. Bush appeared in an introductory film at the Republican National Convention in a pickup truck with his dog. Bush’s consultants and handlers had made a conscious choice to make the governor of Texas appear as genuine and down-home as possible. Bush, the son of a defeated presidential incumbent George H. W. Bush and grandson of a Connecticut senator, had learned in the modern politics of the late twentieth century that image and values trump complicated policy issues in presidential campaigns. Throughout his father’s political career his opponents had painted George H. W. Bush as not being a real conservative who understood the problems of the average man. In 1964 and 1970, George H. W. Bush was viewed to be an Ivy League carpetbagger competing in Texas politics. In his run for the presidency in 1980, George H. W. Bush was criticized for not being conservative enough for Republican primary voters. Even after winning the Gulf War in an impressive fashion during his presidency, Bush was viewed as an out-of-touch elitist who could not relate to the working class.

George W. Bush had seen all these campaigns and worked in most of them. He understood the lessons well. He would deftly use his experience and connections to put together an unlikely campaign to beat the incumbent vice president. He would continually contrast his character and values with those of Bill Clinton and Al Gore in 2000. In an election during a period of economic prosperity and few obvious foreign-policy crises, impressions and images of the candidates were the most important dynamic. George W. Bush would not lose this battle over image. In his acceptance speech at the Republican Convention in 2000, Bush went right after the Clinton administration. “Our current president embodied the potential of a generation. So many
talents. So much charm. Such great skill. But in the end, so much promise, to no great purpose.” Bush promised to “swear to uphold the honor and dignity of the office.”2 He had learned from his father’s experiences; define your opponent before you get defined.

Deciphering his own role in his father’s legacy would be the main factor in George Bush’s business and political life. George W. Bush “clearly idolized his father,” but at the same time, he did not want to be seen as his father’s direct political heir.3 Navigating his place in his “father’s shadow” would be tremendously difficult for George W. Bush.4 As many sons attempt to do, George W. Bush would try to “live up to his father’s expectations without repeating his father’s mistakes.”5 Unlike Joseph Kennedy, George H. W. Bush never demanded that his sons seek political office. Yet, his father’s legacy was one that George W. Bush could not escape. When to follow his father’s example and when to go his own way would be the tension that would dominate George W. Bush’s life course and political career. Most men have to figure out how to deal with their own father’s past on their own terms. Because of his life choices, George W. Bush would have to navigate this tension in the public eye and eventually in the White House itself. Ironically, George W. Bush’s determination to not repeat the mistakes of his father has led him to make serious public policy errors of his own. The modern American presidency is challenging enough without the added burden of following your own father in the office.

His father’s legacy has been a mixed blessing for George W. Bush. He had no foreign-policy experience, and yet he became the first presidential son since John Quincy Adams to win the presidency. His situation presented a difficult paradox and highlights the thesis of the book. The Bush name had given him access to a large national political network, and without the brand name, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine George W. Bush ever becoming president. However, his name and connections would not ensure success as a president.

In the modern birthplace of constitutional representative democracy, George W. Bush used his family background to beat the political system. The Bush fund-raising apparatus excluded most of the other potential Republican rivals for the presidency by the time the primaries had begun in early 2000. His family’s political advantages also allowed George W. Bush to downplay his relative lack of national political experience. However, the name also carried substantial personal and political baggage that would act as a negative force in George W. Bush’s presidency. Following his father’s example, he asked many of the same senior advisors including Dick Cheney, Colin