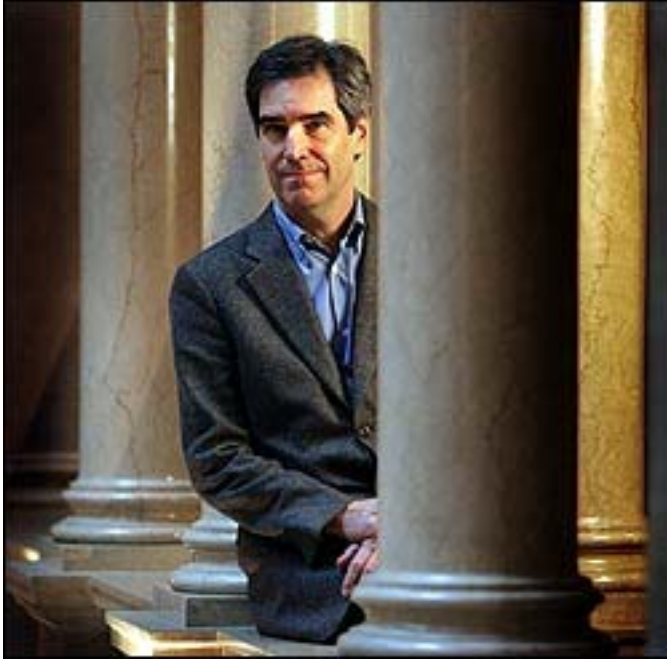


# Disrespect Bush at your peril: Ignatieff

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Michael Ignatieff, head of the Harvard School of Foreign Policy, denies he's a supporter of the Bush administration despite originally supporting the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Michael Ignatieff is not in the best of moods. A double espresso helps. A bit.

On this brief lecture tour of Toronto, the Canadian historian, prolific author and Harvard professor has clearly been encountering people who dismiss the newly re-elected president of the U.S. as "a dumb, ignorant Texas hick," and it raises his hackles because he says underestimating George W. Bush is a monumental error, as the Democrats learned for the second time on Nov. 2, and that Canadians, for the sake of their own sovereign futures, should start to take on board double quick. Though he's the one to bring up her name, the mere thought of Carolyn Parrish, the newly ousted Liberal MP who's made a career of Bush-bashing, incenses him.

"She makes me cringe," he says, cringing. "That attitude is so embarrassing."

Don't misunderstand him. Because Ignatieff originally supported the invasion of Iraq, there are people who think he's become some sort of apologist for the administration. Not so.

Ignatieff is no fan of the president or, for that matter, the entire Bush clan, whom he refers to as "the Corleones of American politics."

It is simply that "it never pays, never, to underestimate this president, intellectually or politically," he says. "He is not the cipher of Dick Cheney or Don Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, or Condoleezza Rice. He is the boss. There is absolutely no question about it. Sorry."

He adds that the only way to beat an "enemy" is to treat him with respect.

Not that he had a vote, but Ignatieff is still intensely rankled by the outcome of the U.S. election. As a "tax-and-spend, Pearsonian, Trudeau Liberal," he is, by proxy, a Democrat, he says, and he believes John Kerry could have won, and would have, had he been a better candidate.

"Bush was very vulnerable and beatable, on Iraq because it's not a popular war, on the deficit, on the economy. But he is a highly effective politician. He was the better candidate with the better machine."

No, Ignatieff doesn't buy the morning-after theorizing that a cultural shift in America accounted for the Republican victory. Kerry had the numbers to win, he says. But he allowed himself to be victimized by "the most disgraceful political smear in 30 years" — the Swift Boat Veterans' allegations that his war record was trumped up.

In public, Bush praised Kerry's Vietnam service, but his election team's financial paw prints were all over the smear campaign, says Ignatieff.

"I was at the University of Toronto in the 1960s and the town was full of draft dodgers. It was extraordinary that Kerry even went to serve in that war when so many others, like Bush, got out of it. It was a very courageous thing to do, the only great thing Kerry has ever done."

When the Swift Boat accusations hit the media, the Democrat camp took nearly a month to respond. Tactical mistake. Ignatieff acts out what Kerry should have done, with attendant ferocity.

"He should have got up and said, 'Excuse me, excuse me, my war record is under attack, my record, when you were flying loops over Texas and absconding from duty in Alabama?'"

"A great politician knows how to deck an opponent. Kerry could have landed a punch and put the president on the floor. And he didn't do it."

That's what the election turned on, he says. Well, that, and Bush's Bill Clinton-like ability to understand and appeal to minorities and immigrant groups who are family-oriented, Christian and aspirational.

"He hoovered up the Hispanic vote in Florida, while the Democrats condescended to them, offering welfare. They don't want welfare, they want a piece of the American pie."

Bush's victory was political, not cultural, he says. "That's why politics are so important. These idiots who walk around saying they don't matter ought to really look at this election."

Ignatieff lists the consequences now en route: A Supreme Court under huge pressure from the White House to endanger women's rights and further encroach on civil rights. Social policies that will increase inequality, with more tax breaks for the well-off but more people on the streets. And more people than ever in emergency wards needing treatment but with no insurance.

Young Americans don't understand that, he says, which is "another thing that makes me pissed off with the election. The youth vote was only 17 per cent, the same as in 2000. Where are the kids? How did we allow this kind of cynicism about politics to get this far? To let idiot comedians get up and say, 'It doesn't matter, politicians are all the same.'

"They're not all the same. There were huge differences in this election. It was ours to win."

Ignatieff left Canada in 1976, first for Britain and then, in 2000, for Harvard University in Boston, where he is director of the Carr Center for Human Rights. The pronoun "we" frequently creeps into his conversation and into his books — the latest of which is this year's glowingly received *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in the Age of Terror*.

It's simply less cumbersome than having to use "Americans" all the time, he explains. "I still carry a Canadian passport and always will."

In fact, the son of eminent diplomat George Ignatieff is a vociferous Canadian.

In the midst of the interview, he takes time to trace the country's record in two world wars — fighting in both, he pointedly notes, before the U.S. deigned to show up.

He's proud, too, that, in its 400-year history, Canada has established "political institutions and an extraordinary Charter of Rights as a safeguard" that make it distinct from its neighbour to the south.

Therefore, knee-jerk anti-Americanism disguised as patriotism irks Ignatieff mightily. Not, of course, that Canada shouldn't be wary of the folks down below.

"I love America, I love American freedom and liberty — most Canadians do. On the other hand, give them an inch, and they'll take a mile.

"No other country in the world has the challenge Canada has, which is that the chief threat to our independence is our best friend."

Managing the relationship may be inherently complex, but it is manifestly clear how Canada should proceed, he says: it must have strong military and intelligence capabilities, strong border patrols and immigration policies.

He applauds former prime minister Jean Chrétien for instituting "Smart Border" policies after 9/11 terrorist attacks.

"People think I've turned into some Bushite Republican when I say all this. But if Chrétien hadn't done that, our independence would genuinely be jeopardized. The U.S. would say, 'Okay, we'll do continental defence' and, if they do that, we cease being a country."

His function, says Ignatieff, is to remind people of that. Down there and up here.

"I don't want Canada to surrender an inch of sovereignty."

With him in situ, it wouldn't dare.